

Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy

A. G. LONG



Ancient Philosophy

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DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

Death and immortality played a central role in Greek and Roman thought, from Homer and early Greek philosophy to Marcus Aurelius. In this book A. G. Long explains the significance of death and immortality in ancient ethics, particularly Plato's dialogues, Stoicism and Epicureanism; he also shows how philosophical cosmology and theology caused immortality to be reimagined. Ancient arguments and theories are related both to the original literary and theological contexts and to contemporary debates on the philosophy of death. The book will be of major interest to scholars and students working on Greek and Roman philosophy, and to those wishing to explore ancient precursors of contemporary debates about death and its outcomes.

A. G. LONG is Senior Lecturer in Classics at the University of St Andrews. He has translated (with David Sedley) Plato's *Meno and Phaedo* (Cambridge, 2010) and is the author of *Conversation and Self-Sufficiency in Plato* (2013) as well as the editor of *Plato and the Stoics* (Cambridge, 2013).

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A. G. LONG

University of St Andrews



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Parts of my discussion of Plato in [chapter 4](#) have been taken from my contribution to *Authors and Authorities in Ancient Philosophy* (edited by Jenny Bryan, Robert Wardy and James Warren), also published by Cambridge University Press.

Abbreviations

- LSJ H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie (1996)
 A Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- SVF H. von Arnim (1903–24) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 4 vols,
 Leipzig, Teubner.

Introduction

The first part of this book is about Greek conceptions of immortality, and in the second [part I](#) discuss death in Greek and Roman philosophy. Considering the topics in that order, immortality before death, will, I hope, seem more reasonable in the light of passages that use the language of immortality to describe the best human lives. Plato's *Timaeus* describes how during their lives people can, to an extent, attain immortality, and Epicurus calls 'immortal' the good things enjoyed in a virtuous person's life. When we consider what comes after life, there is a widely recognized disagreement between Plato and Epicurus. In several Platonic dialogues Socrates argues that the soul is immortal and persists everlastingly after death, whereas Epicurus argues that at death the soul loses all cognitive capacity and is disintegrated. Epicurean discussions of death try to make the prospect of non-awareness and non-existence a source of mental resilience, not despair.

In the first part of this book I draw attention to another ancient debate, less recognized in recent work on ancient philosophy, about what it means to be immortal. This other debate is related to philosophical theories about the 'immortal' gods and the cosmos, but it also emerges when philosophers use immortality in their discussions of human beings and human ethics. The ethical side of the debate will come into view in chapter 2, where I examine Plato's writing about immortality and love. The cosmological or theological strand can be introduced by the following question: if gods are inhabitants of the cosmos, and if, as some philosophers hold, the cosmos as we know it will eventually come to an end, can the gods be immortal? The philosopher-poet Empedocles and the early Stoics, especially Chrysippus, try to retain the gods' immortality in a world-system of merely finite duration, and this affects what they say about human immortality as well. Their answer is, roughly speaking, to distinguish between (a) death as a regular feature of the world we know and (b) the end of this world-system. Calling the gods 'immortal', which in Greek suggests 'deathless', is

to say that they, unlike human beings, are not subject to the intra-cosmic process called death; it is not to call them everlasting, as they will not outlast the end of this world-system. In early Stoicism there is nothing irreverent in that view of the gods' immortality. But Platonists and Epicureans, despite their disagreement on other questions, would unite in rejecting it. For example, the Platonist Plutarch says, with the Stoics as his target, that it is absurd to regard gods as immortal and yet not everlasting. But then Platonists and Epicureans never had to confront the problem of immortal gods in an impermanent world-system. Platonists hold that the world-system in which we currently live will last forever. Epicurean gods are not, at least in a straightforward sense, inhabitants of this world: either they live outside the visible world, or, according to a different interpretation of Epicurean theology, the gods are our own mental constructions of what an endless, perfectly happy creature would be.

This might seem a case of philosophers bringing obscurity to a subject, immortality, that had previously been clear and uncontroversial. But there are ambivalences in immortality going back to the earliest surviving Greek poetry. In Homer, immortality is primarily a quality of the gods, and according to some Homeric passages the standard for immortality is set by the gods, not by the criterion of everlastingness: something is 'immortal' if it belongs to the gods or is appropriate for them, even if it does not last forever. And yet in Homer the gods' own immortality marks their infinite lifespan, which suggests that other immortal items should last forever. Philosophical theories about the cosmos proved to be a new source of pressure on the gods' immortality, but we do not know of a time when immortality had not already become, in some way, an ambivalent or uncertain term in Greek writing. I hope that the discussion of immortality in the first part of the book will make readers of Greek philosophy today less confident in applying to the ancient world their own intuitions about what immortality should or must mean.

The following chapters are about death. I try to get away from a view of ancient writing on death as a battleground between dogmatic Epicureans, insisting that death is the end of us, and equally dogmatic partisans of the soul's immortality. To that end, I illustrate the variety of Epicurean discussions of death, partly within Epicurus' writing but also across the Epicurean tradition. The Epicurean Philodemus' writing about death does not merely use against fears the doctrine that death ends the soul's existence and awareness; he also discriminates between the fears and pangs of anxiety prompted by thoughts about death, aiming to show which of them really

deserve a place in the good life, and which derive from attitudes that are best avoided throughout life, not only when people think about death. Another important strand of philosophical writing about death was sceptical or agnostic, and the fullest surviving example is the first book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. Stoics and other non-Epicurean philosophers make use of the so-called Symmetry argument, which compares non-existence before birth and after death, and, as we will see, when philosophers use that argument it does not follow that they are committed to the soul's destruction at death. They may suppose merely that annihilation is one possible outcome of death, or alternatively they may use the Symmetry argument in order to engage with a particular view of personal identity, as in the dialogue *Axiochus*. Plato's *Phaedo* is also discussed in my chapter on ancient scepticism; its inclusion there will surprise some readers, given the arguments it contains for the soul's immortality. Partly I aim to show what made the dialogue suitable for appropriation by the Roman sceptic Cicero. Plato's dialogue also explores doubts about the human capacity to discover what happens at death, and at the end of the debate Socrates does not simply silence those doubts, but modulates them so that they are heard as a call for further inquiry more than as a critique of human reason. The *Phaedo* suggests that the soul resembles the 'divine', and in reflections on doubt and certainty that view of the soul cuts both ways. It makes problematic the supposedly pious reflex of belittling human reason in comparison with the gods and divine pronouncements. But, as we will see, the orientation of the soul towards the divine throws into doubt what might seem a small and isolated pocket of certainty, the assumption that a soul will, if it survives death, be united with other souls. In the *Phaedo* Socrates goes to his death fearless but no longer certain that unions with other people, or their souls, will be part of his future. An advantage of holding back detailed discussion of the *Phaedo* until this point in the book is that it allows us, in the section on immortality, to consider Plato's other discussions of immortality and the soul (*Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*) in their own terms, without letting the *Phaedo* set our expectations.

Whereas the part of the book on immortality focuses on philosophical writing by Greeks, the chapters on death are an opportunity to introduce and explore some Roman philosophy. Often, particularly in the study of Stoicism, scholars have to rely on Roman philosophers, simply because so much Hellenistic philosophical writing has been lost, but it is now recognized that Roman philosophical texts should not be treated as a way of accessing the lost Greek tradition without first examining the Roman authors' own philosophical profiles and aims. When Roman texts are approached in that spirit, they have more than enough philosophical

interest to keep attention fixed on themselves, and scholars who use Roman texts as sources for the Greek tradition frequently end up studying them as philosophical artefacts of intrinsic importance. It is still unusual to find contemporary philosophy turning to ancient Roman predecessors as much as to the Greeks, but the philosophy of death is an exception: it often refers to the Roman Epicurean Lucretius and his arguments against the fear of death.

The [final chapter](#) is about suicide. The ethics of death in ancient philosophy was not just an endeavour to achieve, through reasoning, a state of fearlessness. Philosophers also reasoned about how to act in relation to death (how to grieve for dead friends, how to make provision for loved ones who will outlive you, and so on), and debates about the appropriateness of suicide have survived in particularly large quantity. In this chapter, I focus on how the interests of other people, moral obligations to them and religious and political obligations feature in ancient discussions of suicide. The discussion of suicide in Plato's *Phaedo* seems to suggest that only religious or theological considerations have a bearing on decisions about suicide, and a passage of Cicero suggests that, in Stoicism, only the agent's own welfare and prospects make a difference. But for both Plato and the Stoics a wider range of considerations carry significance, including the interests of other people.

PART I

Immortality

*Immortality in Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy***I Ino and Elina Makropulos**

Bernard Williams' reflections on immortality use as their model of an immortal life the frozen existence of Elina Makropulos.¹ The opera by Leoš Janáček, based on and sharing the name of Čapek's comedy *The Makropulos Case*, portrays a singer, Emilia Marty, who captivates the men around her but is insulting or indifferent to them, unmoved even when a young admirer kills himself. Eventually, she reveals her original name to be Elina Makropulos and 'Marty' to be one of a long series of aliases. She has been pursuing the formula for an elixir, discovered and tried on her by her father, that added 300 years to her life; she is now in her fourth century and in need of another dose. At the end of the opera, she renounces her pursuit of the elixir and dies, realizing that her life should not have been extended so long. A much younger woman has the insight it took Makropulos, or 'Marty', centuries to reach, and she goes one step further by burning the formula for the elixir. The elixir would have protected either woman not only from death but also from further aging. But in other regards it left Makropulos with a human life, embodied and social, although her inability to love or feel empathy made her emotional range much less than a human's should be. Had she continued to take the elixir, her human (in a non-normative sense of 'human') existence would have extended endlessly into the future, although the Christian tone at the end of the opera raises an awkward question about the end of the world – what would have become of Makropulos at Christ's Second Coming?

¹ Williams 1973, chapter 6 ('the Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality'). Clark 1995 offers a much wider range of models of immortality, drawn from poetry, science fiction and other literature.

In his paper Williams takes immortality to be ‘a state without death’.² This risks misleading us about ancient Greek reflections on immortality if it is taken to mean removing *only* death from a human life and otherwise leaving human existence untouched. Immortalization looks different if the dominant cultural model is not Elina Makropulos but Heracles or Ino, and if it is thought to mean not prolonging human life but apotheosis.³ Heracles is a familiar character from Greek myth; Ino, a mythical woman from Thebes, was transformed into the sea-goddess Leucothea, and in the *Odyssey* she rescues Odysseus from drowning. For the purpose of understanding Homeric immortality, Ino has more to offer than Heracles, as Homer comments on the process that made her divine: ‘in the past she was a mortal of human speech, but now she has received some prerogative in the sea from the gods’ (5.334–5).⁴ The contrast suggests that she ceased to be a mortal not merely by being made deathless, but by receiving this ‘prerogative’. The Greek word (τιμή) is often translated ‘honour’, but in Homeric theology it means something different: the region or sphere where a deity has authority to act, such as the domains of Hades, Poseidon and Zeus – the murky underworld, the sea and the sky (*Iliad* 15.187–190).⁵

In Homer becoming immortal is not just a matter of prolonging one’s existence. It is to become *an* immortal, a god, and that means acquiring the ability to act as a god, in Ino’s case by rescuing drowning sailors. In what follows, I start by exploring Homer’s attributions of immortality, and I will show how they are affected by the fact that his immortal items, in the central or focal meaning of the word, are gods, not endlessly preserved human beings. In starting with Homer, I do not mean to suggest that Greek philosophers responded uncritically to his attributions of immortality. On the contrary, one of the earliest comments by a philosopher on immortality takes aim at the traditional – Homeric but far from uniquely Homeric – distinction between immortals and mortals:

Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living the others’ death, dead in the others’ life. (Heraclitus B62)

² Williams 1973: 82. ³ So Kahn 1974: 436.

⁴ For Ino see also Pindar *Olympian Odes* 2.29–30 and *Pythian Odes* 11.2. In the case of Heracles’ apotheosis Homer describes only the outcome: his image or phantom is in Hades, but Heracles himself has a joyful existence ‘with the immortal gods’ (*Odyssey* 11.601–4). Currie 2005: 42–4 provides a valuable survey of immortalization in early poetry, including the lost epics, such as the *Cypria* and *Aethiopis*.

⁵ Compare the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* 2.85; Herodotus 2.53.

There is no agreement on how to interpret Heraclitus' words, but clearly he is trying to prevent his readers from regarding some items, or creatures, as exclusively immortal: there is some 'life' in respect of which they are dead, and they live by virtue of 'deaths' of some kind.⁶ It may be significant that Xenophanes, an early philosopher-poet who openly rejects the Homeric representation of the gods, does not call gods 'immortal' in the few surviving parts of his poetry, although in such fragmentary material arguments from silence are particularly untrustworthy. Xenophanes almost certainly accepts that gods last forever, for he draws contrasts between gods and 'mortals' (B18, B23). But, he may think, this is not the most important difference between the gods and human beings, or the quality of the gods that needs most emphasis in his own poetry. Despite what Homer suggests, gods' bodies are quite unlike ours (B23): they do not reproduce, and so have no need for sexual organs; they do not perceive by means of specific parts of themselves, and so gods do not have sense-organs like ours (B14, B24). The gods' thoughts and understanding are also unlike ours (B23). In Xenophanes' view, his readers and listeners need to recognize these distinguishing bodily and intellectual features of gods, not (or not only) the gods' immortality.

All the same, the fundamental connection in Homer between immortality and godhood retained its importance for other Greek philosophers. This makes ancient Greek conceptions of immortality in a way more demanding than those in contemporary philosophy, but in another way less so. If immortalization means becoming a god, or at least becoming godlike, then prolonging existence may not be enough: someone who dragged out her or his life forever, with the cognitive and bodily limitations of other human beings, is not a god or even, except in respect of duration, like a god. But Greeks may have been more willing than we are to accept that there has been immortalization in cases where the creature or person has somehow been changed. We are likely to ask ourselves whether there is sufficient *continuity* to make the immortalized item identical with the human being, or former human being. This is treated by Williams as a necessary condition: 'it should clearly be *me* who lives for ever'.⁷ In

⁶ Betegh 2013: 252–3 takes Heraclitus to be referring to physical stuffs, such as air and water, which never pass out of existence altogether but undergo 'deaths'. Competing interpretations are defended in Hussey 1991 and Finkelberg 2013: 155. For Heraclitus' criticism of Homer, see B42 and B56.

⁷ Williams 1973: 91 (emphasis original). For more recent philosophical discussion of personal identity and the afterlife see, for example, Johnston 2010, especially chapter 1 ('is heaven a place *we* can get to?'). In this part of the book Johnston focuses on the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection, not immortality.

Homer, by contrast, all that he says is that the goddess used to be the mortal woman Ino. It was open to Greek philosophers, when writing about immortality, to raise questions about personal identity and continuity, but the cultural connection between immortalization and becoming something different or new makes it rather less surprising that they do not pursue those questions with the urgency we would think appropriate.

Williams was, of course, aware that, from antiquity to the present, believers in personal immortality have not expected a future like that of Elina Makropulos: 'it was not in this world that they hoped to live for ever'.⁸ But putting the point in terms of a different world looks too narrowly to Christianity, or to the version of Christian eschatology that puts the afterlife in 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21.1, Isaiah 65.17).⁹ Of the Greek philosophers discussed in this book, those who believed in personal immortality saw it rather as a godlike or divine existence in, or concurrently with, the present world. This brings me to the main point of Williams' paper, his suggestion that immortality, at least for creatures like us, would inevitably become tedious and meaningless. In an ancient Greek context, this invites a theological response: the endless length of a god's existence does not make it tedious or devoid of meaning.¹⁰ (Empedocles stands off to one side of this exchange, as his gods do not last forever.) The activities undertaken by god, or the gods, do not lose their value, interest or meaning by being extended over infinite time. The pressing questions in this theistic context are whether we could emulate such gods, and whether there is some part of us that is capable of these divine activities and could value them as a god does, rather than merely as a welcome liberation or distraction from mortal existence.

In their discussions of immortality Plato and Aristotle treat divine activities as cognitive or intellectual. When Williams considers an eternity of intellectual activity, he focuses on cases in which the thinkers are so engrossed or absorbed that they could be said to 'lose themselves'. He then asks how an eternity of losing oneself could satisfy a desire for personal immortality.¹¹ But some Greek descriptions of supreme cognitive achievement do not suppose that the thinker

⁸ 1973: 94.

⁹ Constraints of space have prevented me from including a comparison between Greek conceptions of immortality and the Christian promise of resurrection. For the contrast between Platonic and Christian eschatology, see Long (*forthcoming b*).

¹⁰ Fischer 1994: 269 n.4 similarly considers how Williams' argument applies to God's existence.

¹¹ 1973: 96–8. Fischer (1994: 259–60) persuasively uses, against Williams, a distinction between content and ownership: even if I do not feature in the content of my own thoughts, it does not follow that I lose ownership of those thoughts.

or philosopher loses self-awareness.¹² Consider Socrates' description of the escaped prisoner in Plato's famous image of the Cave. Here he is describing someone who has not only escaped but has also succeeded in the most demanding task of all – looking at the Sun, which in the imagery represents understanding the Form of Goodness. Such a philosopher, who has advanced beyond Socrates himself, might think of life down inside the Cave:

Suppose he recalled his former habitation and what passes for wisdom there, and his former fellow-prisoners. Don't you think he would congratulate himself for the change and pity them? (*Republic* 516c4-6)

Our metaphor of 'losing oneself' in an inquiry may be unhelpful when reading philosophers who thought it possible both to understand something timeless or eternal and to appreciate the supreme value, for oneself, of that understanding. The Form of Goodness is impersonal, but knowledge of goodness has a personal application: people who understand goodness will also recognize why it is good for them to have that understanding and to keep directing their attention towards its object. Otherwise it would be hard to explain the philosophers' reluctance to go back inside the Cave: they must be aware of what is at stake for them.

2 Immortality and Godhood in Homer

In our exploration of Greek expectations for immortality the first step is to see when in Homer immortality is attributed to people, gods and things, and when it is not.¹³ On occasion I will look beyond Homer to other poetry. I aim in particular to see whether endless duration into the future was the primary consideration in Homer's attributions of immortality. If there is such a thing as immortality for human beings, the immortal item might be the human being himself or herself, or a part of them, such as the mind or soul, or it might have some other connection with them, such as their reputation. The question then becomes: if something associated with a person in one of these ways will never cease to exist and will continue endlessly into the future, is it *ipso facto* immortal? And is the person, by virtue of its continued existence, immortal? In what follows I will occasionally draw

¹² In what follows I focus on human cognition. But the strongest contrast with Williams is provided by Aristotle's account of divine intelligence, which thinks *exclusively* about itself (*Metaphysics* 12.1074b15-35).

¹³ The Homeric words explored in what follows are ἀθάνατος and ἄμβροτος (on which see Buttmann 1861: 80), both of which I translate as 'immortal'. There is a further word ἄμβρόσιος, but I will not comment on uses of this word, as it is not taken up by philosophical writers.

attention to the fact that a word for ‘immortal’ is not used in some context, and I have already mentioned the frailty of arguments from silence. But there is cumulative evidence that Greek poets were surprisingly austere or sparing in attributing immortality. Once again, that shows how our habits of speech and writing may serve us poorly, at least if we regard ‘immortalization’ and ‘immortality’ as harmless alternatives, or metaphors, for ‘commemoration’, ‘an afterlife’ and ‘endless existence’.

When the Homeric gods are called ‘immortal’, usually they are being described as a group. It is comparatively unusual for a single god to be called ‘immortal’, and there is normally a special reason for it: either someone is drawing attention to the difference between the god and mortals (*Iliad* 22.9, *Odyssey* 5.218), or the god is a lesser or problematic figure whose immortality cannot be taken for granted. Examples of the latter include ‘old man’ Proteus, who unlike most gods has aged past his prime (*Odyssey* 4.384–5), and Circe, who is not only non-Olympian but, unlike the vast majority of Homeric gods, not a member of any divine community (12.302).¹⁴ When immortality is predicated of gods it, of course, marks the fact that they will live forever; as Homer says, the gods ‘are forever’ (e.g. *Iliad* 1.290, 24.99). But already we start to see that the poet’s decision to use the word ‘immortal’ in the singular is influenced by other factors, and in particular his view of what a god is normally like. Normally gods do not age beyond adulthood and usually they belong to some divine group, even if Olympus is not their home. When there is an exception, as with Proteus or Circe, it becomes more important to indicate that he or she is an immortal.

A closely related use of ‘immortal’ is of the gods’ body-parts and possessions, such as Hera’s ‘immortal head’ (*Iliad* 14.177) and the ‘immortal clothes’ given to Odysseus by the goddess Calypso (*Odyssey* 7.260).¹⁵ Often it is unclear whether the poet, in using these words, is marking the fact that the body-parts or possessions will endure forever. Sometimes the point seems to be that the item is appropriate for a god. Consider, for example, the ‘immortal clothing’ in which Achilles’ corpse was cremated (*Odyssey* 24.59). There is no suggestion that the clothing is indestructible and miraculously survived the process of cremation; the poet means rather that the clothing was given by gods and appropriate to a god, and thus shows Achilles’ special status. Compare the ‘immortal oil’, with which

¹⁴ See Page 1979: 5.

¹⁵ See Picot 2014. Picot anticipates this chapter in applying Homeric usage to the interpretation of Empedocles. Usually in Homer (for an exception, see *Odyssey* 4.79) ἀθάνατος is used of body-parts, ἀμβροτος of property, such as clothing.

Aphrodite is anointed after her bath (*Odyssey* 8.364–5): the point is not that the oil will last forever, but rather that it is suitable for adorning the body of a god. The god lasts forever, and this oil is suitable for such a creature. We see the other side of this coin in the sentiment, found in other poetry, that as mortals people should ‘think mortal thoughts’.¹⁶ The exhortation is to think thoughts appropriate for a mortal, not thoughts of only finite duration.

Probably the clearest case in Homer where immortality and endless duration part company is the beautification of Penelope:

Meanwhile the mightiest of goddesses [Athenē] was giving Penelope immortal gifts, so that the Achaeans might admire her. With beauty she first cleansed her fair face, ambrosial beauty, such as that with which fair-crowned Cytherea [Aphrodite] anoints herself when she goes into the lovely dance of the Graces; and she made her taller and statelier to behold, and whiter than sawn ivory. (*Odyssey* 18.190–6)

Penelope is not being beautified forever. She is being made to look attractive for an imminent encounter with the suitors, where she will entice them to give her presents. So ‘immortal’, in the phrase ‘immortal gifts’, cannot mean or imply ‘lasting forever’. Rather, the beauty shed on her is that of a goddess, or at least resembles that of a goddess. In this passage the meaning ‘godlike’ or ‘appropriate for a god’ predominates to such an extent that something is called ‘immortal’ even though its existence is only temporary. Penelope will age and eventually die.¹⁷

Conversely, some items in Homer do last forever and yet are not called immortal. In other words, unending duration is sometimes not a sufficient condition for immortality. In Homer the souls of dead people last forever, even though a soul is vulnerable in other ways (it can be shut out from the community of other souls or made to feel misery or self-pity). And yet souls are never called ‘immortal’ in Homer. What exactly do souls lack that denies them immortality? Unlike most gods, souls have a miserable existence down in Hades, but that cannot be the full answer, as some gods inhabit Hades, and gods too are capable of feeling sorrow. The more important distinctions are that discarnate souls (1) have undergone death,

¹⁶ See Pindar *Isthmians* 5.16, Sophocles *Tereus* fr.290 and the response (discussed in [chapter 3, section 1](#)) in Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b30–1178a2.

¹⁷ In the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* cattle belonging to the god Apollo (18) are called ‘immortal’ (71), but two of them are killed and cooked by another god, Hermes (115–29, 405). Here ‘immortal’ points to divine ownership, or suitability for a divine owner, not immunity to death. Scholars in Greek religion have explained the passage in terms of Hermes’ ambiguity and ability to transgress boundaries (Versnel 2011: 321 n.38, 371), but what would need explanation, if in such poetry ‘immortal’ really implied ‘unkillable’, is his ability to make *another* creature contravene its nature.

or are the outcome of death, and so cannot be called ‘deathless’ (the literal meaning of ἀθάνατος), and (2) lack the prerogative of a god – as we saw above, receiving such a prerogative was an essential part of the divinization of Ino. This makes the status of Menelaus uncertain: according to the god Proteus, Menelaus will not die in Argos but will have a comfortable existence in the Elysian plain (4.561–9). Proteus does not actually say that Menelaus will become an immortal, or will no longer be mortal, and with good reason: Menelaus will be given an easy life, not the authority of a god.

Another marginal case is Tithonus, a man who became the husband of the goddess of the dawn and, at her request, deathless. But she did not think to ask for endless youth as well, with the result that Tithonus, unlike his wife, kept on aging. Tithonus will be endlessly long-lived, but, as he becomes increasingly decrepit, less and less like a god in appearance, strength and mental capacity. Is he immortal? Although Homer mentions Tithonus (e.g. *Iliad* 11.1), we have to turn to other poets for references to his mortality or immortality. In the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* Dawn asked for Tithonus to be ‘immortal and live for all days’ (221), and, as Zeus grants this request, Tithonus must have been made immortal. Contrast Sappho:

Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn
love-smitten, carried off to the world’s end,
handsome and young then, yet in time grey age
o’ertook him, husband of immortal wife. (Sappho fr. 58 Lobel-Page)¹⁸

Calling Dawn the ‘immortal wife’ of Tithonus does not, strictly speaking, imply that Tithonus himself was not immortal. But the last lines draw a contrast between decrepit husband and undiminished wife, echoing a contrast earlier in the poem between the aging Sappho, unsteady on her legs, and the younger women learning music and poetry from her. Given that contrast, it is most natural to take Sappho to mean that Tithonus was *not* immortal: like Sappho herself, he lacked the agelessness of an immortal. The disagreement between this poem and the *Hymn* encapsulates the potential for a conflict, in attributions of immortality, between the absence of death and other qualities of a god.

3 Immortality and Renown in Homer and Lyric Poetry

Sometimes scholars suggest that in Homer and other Greek poetry being renowned or remembered confers immortality, or something approaching

¹⁸ West’s translation (2013, vol. 2, chapter 5).

immortality.¹⁹ (This will be important when in the [next chapter](#) we come to Plato's account of immortality in the *Symposium*.) Other scholarship is more guarded: in Griffin's monograph on Homer and death, there is no suggestion of a connection between renown and immortality, even in the chapter on death and the godlike hero.²⁰ At least concerning Homer, Griffin's silence is the better guide: the pursuit of renown is an important incentive, but Homer never suggests that a person becomes *immortal* by being famous, or that warriors pursue personal immortality by pursuing fame. For one thing, renown is not always imagined as extending into the future: its extent can be a matter of space rather than time. When renown is called 'broad' or 'wide-ranging', or to reach as far as the sky (*Odyssey* 19.333, 9.19–20, 19.108; *Iliad* 8.192), the meaning is that remote contemporaries have heard of the person, not that later generations will do so.²¹ Of course, renown can be associated with future generations, as when Hector imagines later generations mentioning him and so preventing his renown from ever dying (*Iliad* 7.91). Sometimes both space and time are involved: in the last book of the *Odyssey* the souls of the dead suitors complain about Penelope, but far from sully her reputation they cause Agamemnon's soul to speak admiringly of her and to say that the renown for her virtue will never die (24.196). The location for this episode is no less significant than Agamemnon's words: Penelope is being mentioned with approval even in as remote a place as Hades.

Penelope has undying renown, and Hector desires undying renown, but it is not said that Penelope and Hector are themselves, by virtue of their renown, immortal. Even Hector, a character very much capable of self-deception, does not suggest that his undying fame will save him from death, or confer immortality, or something resembling it, on him. Similarly, when Achilles describes the choice between a long life and 'imperishable renown' (*Iliad* 9.410–6), he does not suggest that by gaining such renown he will *himself* become imperishable or immortal, or attain a state approaching immortality. That would undermine the thought that

¹⁹ 'Fame, then, is a kind of surrogate immortality' (Clarke 2004: 78); 'a metaphorical, not a literal form of immortality' (Currie 2005: 72). But the metaphor is ours, not Homer's. In the film *Troy* Brad Pitt, in the role of Achilles, promises his wild-eyed followers 'immortality'. As an attempt to convey the motivation of Homeric heroes this is not so very different from claims in the scholarship.

²⁰ Griffin 1980. For a mixed treatment see chapter 2 of Goldhill 1991: on the one hand, Goldhill suggests that mortality limits the pursuit of renown (71), but on the other he speaks of 'the bard's power to immortalize in song' (103–4; compare 114–5) and calls the chapter 'intimations of immortality'. To my mind, this derives from treating epic and lyric together; outside epic there can be a stronger connection between renown and immortality. See below.

²¹ Compare the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 174.

he faces a stark choice between enduring renown and personal longevity. Achilles cannot have it both ways: he cannot both be famous forever and live for a long time, let alone be both famous and, in some sense or to some degree, immortal.²²

A passage that has been taken to connect renown with personal immortality is Sarpedon's explanation of why he and Glaucus must fight (*Iliad* 12.310–28):²³

Glaucus, why is it that we two are held in highest honour in Lycia with seating, meat, and full cups, and all look upon us as on gods? We possess a great domain by the banks of Xanthus, an orchard and wheat-bearing plough-land. So now we must take our stand with the foremost Lycians, and confront the blazing battle, so that one of the armoured Lycians may say 'our kings ruling in Lycia are not inglorious men, they that eat fat sheep and drink choice wine, honey-sweet. Their might too is good, since they fight amid the foremost Lycians.' Ah, if once escaped from this battle we were forever to be ageless and immortal, I myself would not fight amid the foremost, nor would I send you to the battle that brings men glory. As it is, however, the spirits of death stand over us, too many to count, which no mortal may escape or avoid. So let us advance, whether we will give glory to another, or another to us.

In these lines Sarpedon mentions the fact that he and Glaucus will not be 'immortal' and ageless if they survive the war; he then mentions the glory that warriors derive from fighting. But he does not say that the glory gives them immortality or a substitute for it. The reason why they must fight has been mentioned just before: the two of them have special privileges, and so they above all should take part in the fighting. That way their subjects will believe them to deserve their food, wine and so on. Sarpedon is thus motivated to fight by thoughts about his contemporary subjects, not posterity. The sequence of thought is then as follows: if, on escaping the war, they would be ageless and immortal, there would be a powerful incentive on the other side, to avoid the fighting. But as they are mortal, there is no such counter-incentive. So the original point still stands: those with special privileges must fight and thereby ensure the favourable judgement of their subjects. The point about glory at the very end then acknowledges that the fighting may go for or against them.

²² These descriptions of renown do not use the words ἀθάνατος and ἀμβροτος, with their connotations of the divine. Instead, renown is said 'not to die' or to be 'imperishable'. Compare Ibycus fr. 282.47–8.

²³ See Clarke 2004: 77.

The notion of personal immortality through renown and memory – that is, the remembered person is himself or herself immortal – is much rarer and belongs, at least in the earliest surviving examples, to lyric, not epic.²⁴

His good renown never perishes, nor does his name, but even when he is under the earth he becomes immortal, the man who was excelling others, standing firm and fighting for his land and children when furious Hades killed him. (Tyrtaeus 12.31–4)

One reason why the suggestion of immortality through renown works better in a lyric context is that this kind of poetry allows the poet to focus on a particular point or comparison and to leave out of sight the immortality of gods, such as Ino or Leucothea, next to whom the dead warrior's immortality looks insubstantial. Even in this passage of Tyrtaeus there is a note of paradox: the warrior becomes immortal because of the way in which he was killed. And even in Greek lyric the motif of personal immortality through renown is not as common as we might expect. Pindar's poetry survives in unusually abundant quantity, but he never suggests that the person himself or herself becomes immortal by being famous or celebrated in poetry, although he certainly speaks of 'immortal honours' and an 'immortal name'.²⁵

The following verses of Theognis are more ambivalent:

Even when you go under the dark earth's depths, to the house of Hades that is full of wailing, not even when dead will you ever lose your renown, but you will be in people's thoughts, forever having an imperishable name, Cynrus, roaming across the land of Greece and over the islands, crossing the sea whose only harvest is fish, not riding on the backs of horses – no, you will be transported by the famous gifts of the violet-wreathed Muses. (243–50)

One day Cynrus will die, and his name, not he, will be 'imperishable'.²⁶ And yet Cynrus himself will be present wherever Theognis' poetry is

²⁴ I use 'lyric' in the broader sense that includes elegy. I am not suggesting that this conception of immortality had not been developed when Homeric poetry was composed. Currie has argued well (concerning views of the afterlife) that something absent from Homer does not necessarily postdate Homer: 'an alternative is to suppose that the Homeric poems chose to emphasize one strand of belief, while pointedly suppressing others' (2005: 40; compare 49).

²⁵ *Olympian Odes* 6.57, *Isthmian Odes* 2.28–9, fr. 121 (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Demosthenes* 26). A finely described achievement becomes 'immortal' (*Isthmian Odes* 4.40–1). The discussion of fame in *Pythian Odes* 3.110–5 does not mention immortality. Contrast Currie 2005: 353 ('immortalization in song') and 404.

²⁶ Contrast Thomas 1995: 110 ('Theognis even claims that Kynros, whom his verse advises, will be immortal because his name will continue to be on the lips of guests at the feast') and Campbell 1967: 362 (Theognis wishes to remind his audience of Homer, 'who above all had conferred immortality on his heroes'). Thomas takes Theognis to be denying that Cynrus will die (1995: 115), but οὐδέ

enjoyed, his identity divided between the soul in Hades and the songs that traverse the world bearing his name. As Theognis put it rather earlier in the poem, Cynos 'will be present at every feast and banquet' (239–40). Theognis is trying to convey both the reality of Cynos' future death and the geographical reach that the dead Cynos will enjoy. It may seem inappropriately pedantic, in a study of such poetry, to press the distinction between personal immortality and the survival of a name or renown. But the distinction is important when trying to understand the cultural expectations against which philosophers explored immortality.

Before we move on from epic and lyric poetry I will summarize what we have found in this and the [previous section](#). In Homer, the words for 'immortal' have such a tight association with gods that they can be used to mark a possession or a body-part as belonging to a god or appropriate for a god. In Penelope's beautification, the meaning 'god-appropriate' predominates to such an extent that an item is called 'immortal' even though it will not last forever. And Homer does not call 'immortal' items that endure forever but have (in some sense) undergone death and lack the characteristics of gods, namely, the souls of dead human beings. All the same, Homer's immortals are said to exist forever, and it is undeniable that 'immortal' can indicate this. The meaning of 'immortal' is thus poised uncertainly between (1) 'existing forever' and (2) 'divine' or 'appropriate for a god'. Even if a person's renown is favourable, wide ranging and, in special cases, imperishable, in Homer that is not a reason for regarding the person herself or himself as immortal. In lyric poetry, such people are sometimes called immortal, but less often than we would expect.

When we turn to religious and philosophical ideas about the human future at death, we should not assume that Homeric usage will simply determine how later authors apply or withhold words for 'immortality'. But Homeric usage should make us wary of our own intuitions about whether a theory of the human's future makes the human being, or the soul, immortal. Moreover, the ambivalence in Homeric usage suggests that there would have been scope for disagreement between Greeks themselves on this point. It was open to Greeks to focus narrowly on the question of duration, or alternatively to prioritize the criterion of godlikeness or god-appropriateness. One and the same theory

θανών echoes the comment on Achilles in *Odyssey* 24.93 ('not even in death did you lose your name'), and in a negative sentence οὐδέ functions as καί (compare Sophocles *Electra* 595). See Thomas 1995: 113–7 for further discussion of fame and renown in lyric poetry. For the denial (and affirmation!) of death, see Simonides fr. 9 Page: those who gave their homeland 'unquenchable renown' 'having died, are not dead, for their valour glorifies them and leads them up from the house of Hades'.

would then have appeared to some Greeks as a theory of human immortality, to others as something else. I turn now to one theory of our post-mortem future on which the Greek sources are divided. I start with the Pythagoreans and Pindar and then look in more detail at Empedocles.

4 **Reincarnation and Immortality: An Uncertain Relationship**

In Greek and Roman writing, the view that one's current life belongs to a series of lives is associated above all with Pythagoras and his followers, the Pythagoreans, although the oldest evidence for it comes from non-Pythagorean authors: Xenophanes, Pindar, Herodotus, Empedocles and Plato. It is hard to find a label for the theory that does not import unhelpful assumptions. The technical term 'metempsychosis' suggests that a soul or *psuchē* moves from one body to another, which is accurate concerning Herodotus' testimony, Plato and, in two passages, Pindar, but not Empedocles. To avoid implying that the transmigrating entity is a soul, I will use the more common word 'reincarnation'.²⁷ In what follows, I will consider whether reincarnation was connected, in ancient sources, with theories of an 'immortal' person or soul. I am examining the wording of ancient sources, and it is better not to stipulate what immortality 'ought' to mean, or 'must' mean – we have just seen the danger of relying on our own intuitions about immortality.

According to Walter Burkert's influential study, Pythagoras preached immortality:

For this is the picture of Pythagoras that emerges from the study of the most ancient testimony, not influenced by Plato. He is the hierophant of Great Mother mysteries with an Anatolian stamp, and has a new doctrine, probably influenced by Indo-Iranian sources, of immortality and of the triumph over death through successive rebirths.²⁸

Later Platonists, such as Porphyry (*Life of Pythagoras* 19, 45) and Iamblichus (*On the Pythagorean Life* 32),²⁹ were in no doubt that Pythagoras' teaching included the Platonic doctrine, defended at length in Plato's *Phaedo*, that the soul is immortal. But we do not have to cite passages from late

²⁷ Kamtekar 2016 is an excellent philosophical discussion of reincarnation, focussing especially on Plato.

²⁸ Burkert 1972: 165.

²⁹ Compare Iamblichus' claim that Zalmoxis, influenced by Pythagoras, held that the soul is immortal (*On the Pythagorean Life* 30).

antiquity. One of the oldest pieces of evidence in Greek for belief in reincarnation, the writing of Herodotus, treats reincarnation as a theory of immortality:

The Egyptians were the first who pronounced the following doctrine too: that the human soul is immortal, and as the body is dying the soul enters another living thing just as it is being born; and that after it has passed through all creatures of land, sea and air, it enters again into a human body that is being born, a cycle which it completes in three thousand years. Some Greeks have made use of this doctrine, some earlier and some later, as if it belonged to them. I know their names, but refrain from writing them down. (2.123)

In this unfriendly report, predating and so of course independent of Plato's dialogues, the doctrine of reincarnation is taken to be one of an immortal soul. Herodotus is clearly thinking of two groups of plagiarizing Greeks, 'some earlier and some later' (perhaps he has in mind Pythagoras and then Empedocles).

Similarly, what was probably Plato's earliest report of reincarnation (*Meno* 81a-c) treats it as a theory of immortality. In the section in italics below, Socrates is quoting verses by Pindar on Persephone's role in despatching souls back to life on the earth's surface:

Pindar also says it, as do many other poets, all those that are divine. And what they say is this – consider whether you think it is true. They say that a person's soul is immortal, and at one time it meets its end – the thing they call dying – and at another time it is born again, but never perishes. They say that, because of this, one should live one's whole life in the most holy way possible. For from whoever

Persephone accepts the atonement for ancient grief, in the ninth year she sends their soul up again to the sun above, and from them arise august kings and men swift in might and matchless in wisdom; henceforth people call them holy heroes.

According to Socrates, Pindar's view of reincarnation involves the following claims: (1) the human soul is immortal; (2) it undergoes birth and the event called dying; (3) it is never destroyed. And (4) as a consequence one must live as piously as possible. Presumably, the support in Pindar's poem for the last, ethical point is the suggestion that Persephone rewards some people with a better way of life. How fair is this as an account of the quoted verses of Pindar? Pindar's verses clearly suggest that a 'soul' comes back to life, and so Socrates has good textual support for treating this version of reincarnation as a theory about the human soul and its destiny. On the other hand, in the quoted verses Pindar himself does not call the soul 'immortal', and so it is not certain that Pindar took himself to be offering

a view of immortality. Another way in which Socrates' account in Plato is inaccurate or at least incomplete is that he fails to note that for Pindar reincarnation ideally culminates in a certain form of existence: becoming a hero. As often in views of reincarnation, the aspiration is not for the process simply to continue but somehow to be transcended.

Uneasiness about Plato's reliability on these points is only reinforced when we turn to Pindar's discussion of reincarnation in a surviving poem, the second *Olympian Ode* (2.56–83). Here Pindar speaks of 'minds' (*phrenes* or φρένες, 57) being punished and rewarded, and later of a 'soul' (*psuchan* or ψυχήν, 70); it looks as if he, unlike Plato, has no special attachment to the Greek word for soul.³⁰ As in the verses quoted by Plato in the *Meno*, Pindar does not suggest that people or their minds are immortal because of the succession of lives. There is a future for human minds or souls after death that ideally, after pure conduct both in life and between lives, leads to blissful existence on the island of the blessed. But even this is not described as immortality.

Those who had the strength three times, when they stayed on either side, to keep their souls completely free from wrongdoing, take Zeus' road to the end and come to the tower of Cronus, where ocean breezes blow around the island of the blessed. (2.68–72)

Those who receive this reward include heroes, such as Achilles and his father, Peleus (2.78–83). But even heroes as distinguished as these are not gods, and this may be why Pindar finds it inappropriate to call them, or the minds that join them, 'immortal'. Human minds may endure forever, but they do not become gods. The contrast between Pindar and Plato suggests that to fifth- and fourth-century Greeks it was not certain whether a theory of reincarnation makes people, or their souls or minds, immortal, or makes immortality an attainable reward. But, as the *Meno* shows, it was possible to hold that a soul *both* is immortal *and* undergoes birth and 'dying' in a series of incarnations; it is immortal inasmuch as it is never destroyed, even though it is subject to the event called 'death'. This is radically different from the view of immortality in Empedocles, as we will soon see.

It is hazardous to connect any of these perceptions of reincarnation with Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans.³¹ But we know that it was possible in antiquity to doubt whether the Pythagoreans really had a doctrine of immortality. According to the fourth-century Academic Heraclides of

³⁰ Compare Pindar fr.131b, where he says that 'a living image of life', not a 'soul', remains after death.

³¹ Horky ([forthcoming](#)) explores immortality in Pythagorean theories of the soul.

Pontus, Pythagoras claimed to have been offered by the god Hermes anything *except immortality* (Diogenes Laertius 8.4). (He chose to retain his memory both in life and in death.) The possibility that the Pythagorean afterlife could be distinguished from immortality – and by a follower of Plato – makes us look at familiar passages with new eyes. When Plato offers a far more sustained treatment of immortality, in his dialogue *Phaedo*, the interlocutors who must be convinced about the soul's immortality (86a-b, 88b, 95b-e), Simmias and Cebes, are Pythagoreans, or at least have Pythagoreanism in their intellectual past. Both men are followers of Socrates, but they have spent time with the Pythagorean Philolaus (61d).³² These Pythagoreans, or former Pythagoreans, are open to the suggestion that the soul lasts longer than the body, but they demand to be shown that it is actually immortal. This choice of opponent makes good sense if, when he wrote the *Phaedo*, Plato was no longer sure that the Pythagoreans believed the soul to be immortal.

One way to have reincarnation without immortality is suggested in an objection put to Socrates by Cebes, one of the former Pythagoreans. Cebes asks why we should not suppose that the soul experiences many births and deaths but eventually perishes, like a weaver who outlives many of his clothes but eventually dies and is survived by his last set of clothes. In a similar way, the soul could outlive many bodies, but then perish before its last body decays (*Phaedo* 87b-88b). Reincarnation could end not in the island of the blessed but in annihilation. Plato himself thus acknowledges that reincarnation does not imply immortality – on a view of immortality as everlastingness. Cebes' suggestion about reincarnation is consistent with the anecdotes about Pythagoras' recollection of previous lives, or Xenophanes' mocking comment on Pythagoras recognizing a deceased friend in a puppy.³³ Even if Pythagoras, a friend, or some part of them survived the end of previous lives, they or it may not survive every death to come.

5 Reincarnation and Immortality in Empedocles

The philosopher-poet Empedocles provides the fullest account of reincarnation that is free from Platonic influence. It is now common practice in scholarship on Empedocles to relate his account of reincarnation to his

³² For discussion of the two men see [chapter 4, section 2](#).

³³ Diogenes Laertius 8.4–5, 36 (Xenophanes B7); Porphyry *Life of Pythagoras* 26; Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life* 14.

theory of cosmic change, rather than to treat them as two separate parts of his thought.³⁴ According to his cosmology, the physical stuffs that constitute the world oscillate between complete combination, when the so-called Sphere comes into existence, and complete separation. Much about Empedocles' cosmic cycle is controversial,³⁵ but both these two states are fatal to the current cosmos and the kind of organisms it contains. Empedocles says openly that the Sphere rejoices in its 'solitude' (B27), and this indicates that he, other human beings and even other gods will not exist at the time of the Sphere.³⁶ The two great cosmic forces Love and Strife are the exceptions; they continue to exist, even during the period of the Sphere, for it is during Love's dominance that the Sphere comes to exist, and it is Strife that will bring the Sphere to an end (B31). It is appropriate to treat Love and Strife as exceptions, for they are not inhabitants of the cosmos, or the co-inhabitants of creatures like us, so much as the forces that cause this structured cosmos and its inhabitants to exist.

In Empedocles' discussion of reincarnation, the item that transmigrates between, or as, different organisms is called a 'deity' (δαίμων), not a soul (B115), although later writers in antiquity took him to be describing the fate of 'souls'.³⁷ The Greek word for 'deity' is standardly used of the god responsible for an individual's success or misfortune, and it is part of the Greek word for 'happy' (εὐδαίμων), a word which suggests that one's deity has been well-disposed and favourable. Empedocles thus retains the idea that, for better or worse, a deity is responsible for his current situation, but, by identifying himself with that deity, locates the blame for his mortal plight (and, as it will turn out, the credit for escaping it) in himself and his actions. He has brought impurity on himself, and it is up to him to negotiate mortal existence with sufficient purity to transcend it. Given his view of what will become of the world, this 'deity' cannot last forever; by the time of the Sphere, it will no longer exist, but will have been absorbed into the Sphere. Empedocles cannot expect himself to have more than a finitely long future ahead of him. And yet he makes what is probably the boldest claim to personal immortality anywhere in Greek philosophy:

³⁴ See Osborne 1987 and, for the part played by the Strasbourg papyrus in confirming this approach, Janko 2004: 2 and Trépanier 2017: 132.

³⁵ See O'Brien 1969; Osborne 1987, 2003; Sedley 2007: 31–74.

³⁶ The Greek word (μὴν) has been translated 'stillness' (see Wright 1995: 187–8), but the translation 'solitude' is cogently defended in Slings 1991. See also Palmer 2009: 263 n.6.

³⁷ See, for example, Clement *Stromateis* 4.23.150 (the context of Empedocles B146). For a different account of Empedocles' 'deities' that relates them more closely to his biology, see Trépanier 2014 and 2017: 139–43.

My friends, you who live in the great city of the yellow Acragas, on the heights of the citadel, attentive to noble deeds, hail! I go about as an immortal god, no longer mortal, honoured among all, as I deserve, crowned with ribbons and lavish garlands. (B112.1–5)³⁸

It has been suggested that Empedocles cannot really mean to call himself ‘immortal’, as that would imply the unending existence that his cosmic cycle rules out.³⁹ But our study of Homeric immortality should make us suspicious towards inflexible uses of immortality in modern scholarship, particularly when reading a poet like Empedocles, whose language is strongly influenced by Homer and Hesiod.

Empedocles calls gods both ‘long-lived’ (B21.12, B23.8; **a** (ii) 2) and ‘immortal’ (B112.4, B147).⁴⁰ An attractive explanation of the term ‘long-lived’ is that he wishes to mark the gods’ superiority without implying that they will exist forever.⁴¹ But we should be careful not to say that he is representing gods as *mortal*, as that would contradict his attributing immortality to them. To make sense of his conception of immortality we should consult his comment on death (B8):

Next lesson: there is no birth of any mortal creature, nor an end in accursed death, but only mixture and change of what was mixed, but ‘birth’ is the name given to them by people.

Empedocles is not denying the reality of death – he very often refers to ‘mortal’ creatures in the extant verses, as he does here. But he denies its finality or its being an ‘end’. To quote another verse, it is wrong to say that the organism and its parts are ‘completely destroyed’ (B11).⁴² When a creature dies, its constituent parts are subject to ‘change’: they are transferred and available for reuse in the development of new creatures. (Empedocles’ wording, ‘change of what was mixed’, does not specify the precise nature of the ‘change’ involved: the cognate verb is used elsewhere in his poetry, B17.12, to refer generally to changes of both separation and combination.) The constituents of one organism may be used in another, either after a delay or, in predation or the consumption of plants, as soon as they have been digested.

From a global point of view, death is not final but a process by which life in the cosmos is sustained. But, we may object, there will be a final destruction of all organisms (apart from the Sphere itself) when the

³⁸ For defence of my translation, see Long 2017: 12–13. ³⁹ Barnes 1982: 502.

⁴⁰ A letter in bold refers to the Strasbourg papyrus (see Martin and Primavesi 1998; Janko 2004).

⁴¹ See Barnes 1982: 501–2; Rangos 2012: 317 and 318 n.8; Trépanier 2017: 135–6.

⁴² Compare B12 and B15.

Sphere is formed, or, at the other acosmic or anti-cosmic extreme, when the elements are completely separated. Empedocles would reply that this is not what he means by 'death', or what other people have in mind when they talk of organisms 'dying'. 'Birth' and 'death' refer, in normal usage, to regular intra-cosmic processes. Empedocles follows this usage but encourages his pupils to regard such processes as mixture and change, and not to view death as final. In calling items 'immortal', Empedocles is marking their freedom from the intra-cosmic process commonly called 'death', not suggesting that they will exist forever by outlasting the current cosmos. He must have been aware that this contradicts Homer's using 'immortal' of gods who 'are forever'. But no doubt he was encouraged by the Homeric passages we have seen where temporary items, associated in various ways with the gods, are called 'immortal'.⁴³ There was good Homeric precedent for using 'immortal' for items that will eventually be destroyed, provided that they are in some way divine.

In Empedocles, the contrast between immortals and mortals refers not to different fates at the end of the world but to different modes of existence in the world as it currently is. Immortal gods excel all other organisms in their 'domains' or 'prerogatives' (B21.12, 23.8, 146.3, a (ii) 2), the Homeric term we encountered above for the parts of the world, or the spheres of responsibility, in which gods can move and act. An organism such as a fish or bird can live only in a certain environment, but there is no such restriction on gods. One god is described as 'darting with rapid thoughts through the entire cosmos' (B134.5). We might say that a god's natural habitat, unlike that of a mortal organism, is the entire cosmos, not a particular part of it. As a 'long-lived' creature, a god's existence will not be disrupted by the deaths, or (as Empedocles would say) changes, through which mortal life is renewed. Unlike us, a god has no need to sustain itself by killing other organisms, plants or animals, and absorbing parts of them; and a god cannot be the victim of this kind of violence.

So far this seems an effective way to highlight the limitations of mortal existence, albeit with the peculiar fusion of theology and biology that is Empedocles' hallmark. But Empedocles also imagines how an immortal could become a mortal, and vice versa.⁴⁴ Suppose an immortal kills another organism and thus implicates itself in the cycle of life and death from which it should properly be detached (B115.3, B139, d 5–6). It will then be

⁴³ Compare Picot 2014.

⁴⁴ This is also part of his philosophy of nature, where he describes immortal items becoming 'mortal' (B35.14). That passage confirms that, in Empedocles' conception of immortality, something can be immortal without being immortal forever.

punished by being caught up in a sequence of lives and deaths as mortal creatures, during which it will be separated from the company of other gods and confined to particular environments, one after another:

For thirty thousand seasons it wanders from the Blessed ones, becoming over time all sorts of mortals, exchanging the harsh paths of life. The powerful air chases it to the sea, and the sea spits it out to the surface of the earth, and the earth into the rays of the shining sun, and the sun casts it into the currents of air. One receives it from another, but all hate it. I now am one of these, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, trusting in mad Strife. (B115.6–14)

From a literary perspective, this is an ingenious re-imagining of the punishment of gods as described by Hesiod. In Hesiod, a god that breaks an oath by the Styx comes as close to a death as a god can come: for a year the god falls into a death-like coma and stops breathing, and then is exiled from the gods for nine years, a period during which ‘one trial receives him from another’ (words which Empedocles appropriates in his own verse). After that the punishment ends, and he joins the gods again (*Theogony* 793–804). Empedocles too looks for a way in which a god can become mortal and finds the answer in reincarnation: the god is not annihilated prematurely but encapsulates in his own banishment the cycle of death and birth through which mortal life perseveres. Immortality, by contrast, was not merely to remain in existence but to persist as one and the same organism. Whereas the banished god forfeited immortality and the continuity of a long life, in the passage quoted on page 24 above (B112) Empedocles has achieved the immortalization that brings the deity’s banishment to an end: he is ‘an immortal god, no longer mortal’.

There are significant differences between Empedocles’ account of reincarnation and the theory summarized by Herodotus (see p. 20 above). Herodotus suggests that, according to the Greeks who plagiarized Egyptian lore, immortality is an intrinsic quality of the human soul, and so all human souls will be reincarnated. Empedocles does not indicate whether all human beings will be reincarnated, let alone become immortal, and in the account of reincarnation the emphasis is on his own personal plight – ‘I now am one of these, an exile from the gods and a wanderer’ (B115.13) – not what lies ahead for all human beings.⁴⁵ Herodotus describes as ‘immortal’ a soul that migrates between organisms, whereas for Empedocles such an entity would not be immortal; immortality is achieved precisely by

⁴⁵ Compare Sedley 2007: 51. Sedley takes Empedocles to believe that not all humans will undergo reincarnation.

detaching oneself, as a god, from this sequence of births and deaths. In other words, for Empedocles immortality and reincarnation are incompatible, whereas in Herodotus reincarnation is precisely what happens to the immortal soul. Finally, in calling the transmigrating item a 'deity' Empedocles is not trying to explain how it retains its identity from one life to the next; rather, he is showing the divine status that it has lost and can regain, and also, I have argued, suggesting that he has only himself to blame for his predicament as a mortal.⁴⁶ Calling it a 'deity' looks to its divine origin and future, and to this question of responsibility, not to a metaphysical question of identity; it is possible that elsewhere in his poetry Empedocles tried to explain physical or psychological continuity between lives, but his use of the word 'deity' does not hint at his answer.⁴⁷ By contrast, when Herodotus indicates what persists from one organism to another, he calls it the soul. This may fall far short of a metaphysical account of immortality, but it suggests where such an account could get started: consider what makes the soul both immortal and a suitable bearer of personal identity. This challenge, especially the first part of it, will be taken up in Plato's accounts of immortality.

6 Summary

In Homer, immortal items are gods, their physical parts and the things that they own or give to others, or that are appropriate for gods. As criteria in attributions of immortality, divine ownership or appropriateness for a god can outweigh everlastingness, which is usually the primary or only consideration in modern philosophical discussions of immortality. As in some passages of Homer, Empedocles does not make everlastingness a necessary condition for immortality. Instead, the criteria are living as a god and not being subject to the intra-cosmic process of death. Pindar and Empedocles offer versions of reincarnation which can end in a blissful state; there is no evidence that Pindar would call even that outcome immortality, but Empedocles does so explicitly and contrasts it with the previous states during which he was mortal and had a series of lives. So we should

⁴⁶ Compare Strawson's interpretation of Locke (2011). According to Strawson, Locke's discussion of the 'person' is about responsibility, not identity or continuity.

⁴⁷ So Empedocles' refraining from the word 'soul', at least in this context (it is used in B138), is more significant than Barnes 1982: 501 allows. In Trépanier 2017: 144–5, it is suggested that B9 gives an analysis of the human soul as a mixture of 'fire' (more literally, light) and air. But Empedocles may be doing something quite different, more modest but charming: describing the process of a baby's birth as an encounter with light and air simultaneously.

distinguish between three views of reincarnation, not two: the version of Herodotus and Plato's *Meno*, where every soul is immortal and transmigrates between organisms; that of Pindar, where souls can become heroes but not, at least in the surviving verses, immortal; and that of Empedocles, where at least some people can become immortal gods, but only when they *cease* transmigrating between organisms. In Empedocles, unlike the *Meno*, immortality is incompatible with continued involvement in the cycle of births and deaths.

Of the three, Pindar and Empedocles are more Homeric, in that their attributions of immortality still show a tight connection with godhood: in Empedocles' eschatology someone becomes immortal by becoming a god; in Pindar the most highly rewarded human souls are not gods and (and, we should probably say, therefore) are not said to be immortal. By contrast, in Herodotus' summary souls can be immortal without being gods. Plato will try to make sense of immortality and immortalization without godhood. But even in Plato there is often an expectation that immortal items should be in some sense divine, not, or not merely, everlasting.

*Platonic Immortalities***1 Everlastingness or Godlikeness, Achievement or Essence**

In several Platonic dialogues (*Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*) Socrates argues that the human soul is immortal, and these arguments are now among the most intensely studied parts of his writing. Evidently Plato thought it especially valuable to explore arguments on that subject. In part this reflects a distinction between different aspects of the afterlife. Concerning the bare thesis that the soul is immortal, formal proofs can be constructed and then scrutinized, either by Plato's readers or (e.g. at *Phaedo* 85e-88c) within the dialogue by Socrates' interlocutors, whereas other aspects of the afterlife, such as where disembodied souls go and for how long, do not repay that particular kind of treatment and must be explored in a different mode. Formal argument concerning the thesis of immortality is thus supplemented with myths, which give speculative accounts of the soul's future after death. But Plato's interest in arguments about immortality is not purely eschatological: he uses discussion of the immortality thesis to launch reflections on the power, and limitations, of human reasoning and argument. In his *Phaedo* the soul's immortality is subjected to closer and closer scrutiny, and, as the discussion unfolds, Socrates' friends start to feel and express doubts not only about whether the soul is immortal, but also about the level of certainty that is possible for human inquirers, particularly in such a difficult area.¹ Plato also sees a connection between immortality and ethical questions about human life, such as the value, positive or negative, of love and erotic relationships: in two dialogues, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that a proper appreciation of love requires people to look to their more-than-mortal nature or potential, and in the *Phaedrus* showing the soul's

¹ See [chapter 4, section 2](#).

immortality, by means of a formal proof, is a key early step in defending the deity Eros or Love against his detractors.² One theme of this chapter will be how treatments of love and immortality are adapted to fit one another, and the argument for immortality in the *Phaedrus* will be considered in some detail.³

The immortality thesis, as it is normally understood, treats the soul as essentially everlasting. This can be broken down into two parts: first, ‘immortal’ means everlasting, and, second, the soul is made immortal not by being knowledgeable, just or virtuous in some other way, but simply by being a soul. Souls would not forfeit their immortality if they, or the people to whom they belong, became wicked, impious or ignorant. Socrates’ formal proofs focus on immortality in this sense, but it was not the only understanding of immortality available to Plato. In Empedocles’ poetry, as we saw in the [last chapter](#), immortality is not an essential property but one that can be lost and acquired (or re-acquired). In the surviving lines of his poetry, Empedocles leaves it open whether all, most or only a small portion of humanity will ever attain immortality, whereas the thesis of an essentially immortal soul attributes immortality to a part of every human being, from the best to the worst. In some passages, Plato too will suggest that immortality can be earned or achieved, at least by the *human being* or, in other words, the soul-body composite, and that some people fail to achieve immortality. Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* explains how humans strive to achieve immortality, not how they can recognize an essentially immortal part of themselves. In what follows, it will be important to keep in mind this distinction between essential immortality and achieved immortality.⁴ The two kinds of immortality are not necessarily incompatible. For example, a philosopher could hold that an item (e.g. the soul-body composite) can achieve immortality even though a part of the item (e.g. the soul, or a part of the soul) is essentially immortal. Alternatively, it may be that the very same thing is, in one sense

² Translating ‘eros’ as ‘love’ has been defended by Ferrari (1992: 269 n.1). See also Osborne 1996: 22, 86–116.

³ Miller 2006 provides an overview of Plato’s arguments for the soul’s immortality; for the arguments in the *Phaedo*, see Sedley and Long 2010, xxvi–xxxiii. One question I do not consider in this chapter is the relationship between ‘immortal’ (ἀθάνατος) and ‘indestructible’ (ἀνώλεθρος) in *Phaedo* 105e–107a, as this would require a full account of the Last Argument. On that question, see O’Brien 2007; Sedley 2009: 146–53; Sedley and Long 2010: xxxiii.

⁴ I have learned much from Sedley 2009, which clearly distinguishes between these kinds of immortality. Sedley also considers a third kind of immortality, which I discuss more briefly below, namely immortality conferred upon an item by an external agent, such as the benevolent god who in the *Timaeus* constructs souls.

of ‘immortality’, essentially immortal, and in another sense has to earn it. Or, as Timaeus argues (see [section 5](#) below), the soul (or rather the rational part of the soul) is immortal in one sense, and the human being can achieve immortality in a different sense.

This brings me to the disagreement between philosophers about what immortality is: in Empedocles, being immortal means not existing forever, but detachment from the cycle of deaths and births and living, for a long but finite time, as a god. By contrast, Plato’s Socrates does not offer a view of immortality that treats people as gods, or gods-in-the-making, and in his explorations of immortality he walks what must have seemed, in the fourth century, a fine line between viewing people as gods and as purely mortal. (It requires some imagination on our part to appreciate this, as arguments for the soul’s immortality, which make no claim to human godhood, are now an established part of our philosophical curriculum, in large measure because of the arguments put forward by Plato’s Socrates.)⁵ On the other hand, the association between immortality and divinity is still important in Plato. Sometimes it looks as if Plato expects immortal items to have some divine quality over and above everlastingness. If so, Plato is more strongly influenced by Homeric usage, and the connotations of divinity in Homeric immortality, than his formal arguments for the soul’s immortality might suggest.

Consider, for example, the contrast between the *Phaedo* and the myth of the afterlife in the *Gorgias*. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates does not argue that the soul cannot be destroyed, but in the myth at the end of that dialogue he seems to assume that souls will exist forever. The evidence for that assumption is the discussion of incurably wicked souls: punishment is normally beneficial, but an incurable soul cannot be benefited at all (525c). Instead, these souls are made an example to others. If a soul could be destroyed, then there would indeed be a way of benefiting incurable souls – namely, destroying them. (As we will see in the [next section](#), Socrates indicates that it is worse for a wicked soul to exist, in its wicked condition, for a long time than for a short time.) The claim that even the gods do not benefit incurable souls suggests that such souls are indestructible. But in the *Gorgias*, souls are never said to be *immortal*, even in the myth or in Socrates’ earlier comments on the afterlife (492d–493d). Souls last forever without being immortal, exactly as in Homer. This may be related to the fact that in the *Gorgias* there is nothing inherently divine, or godlike, about human souls. The soul-body comparison is important at several points in

⁵ Compare Guthrie 1950: 115–6.

the dialogue, but Socrates never suggests that the soul is somehow more divine, or more like the divine, than the body. Usually his point is that for some skill or science that attends to the body there is a corresponding skill or science directed towards the soul: for example, bodies are brought into a good condition by physical training, and souls are put in a good condition by laws (464b-c, 504d, 520b). (In Greek thought, laws are commonly considered to play an important role in education.) The soul is said to be more 'precious' or 'valuable' than the body (512a), but the reason is that the most serious evil is to have one's soul in a bad condition, and the condition of the soul has a greater bearing than anything else on a person's welfare (477c, 477e, 511a). But souls are not inherently wise or virtuous, just as bodies are not inherently healthy or strong. Souls are what people make of them: good or, in the most depressing cases, wicked, hideous and covered in scars, as the myth imagines them (524e-525a). Some souls are virtuous, but every soul bears the mark of the moral decisions made in life, and so, according to the myth, some souls present a less wholesome appearance than the person's body. Plato's Socrates refrains from calling such an item immortal, even when he assumes it to be everlasting.

The *Phaedo* presents the fullest account of the soul as immortal, and one of Socrates' arguments there relies on the affinity or similarity between the soul and 'divine' objects, the Forms and the gods (78b-80b). (Similarity to the divine is only one aspect of the argument: Socrates also draws support from the soul's invisibility and its being incomposite.) In part, the affinity between the soul and the divine is bound up with the soul's knowledge of the Forms: each soul enters life with knowledge of the Forms, as the discussion of recollection (72e-77a) tries to establish. But also relevant is the soul's tendency to direct its attention to the Forms: when a soul is able to engage in reflection on its own, undisturbed by the body, it considers Forms, changeless, eternal and 'immortal' objects (79d). This shows an 'affinity' between the soul and these objects (79d). In its relationship with the body, the soul has a further resemblance to the divine: it is naturally suited to being the leader or master, the body to being the slave or ruler (79e-80a). The language of slavery suggests that Socrates has in mind the gods, not the Forms, for earlier in the dialogue he has described the gods as our owners (62b-c). Here, too, the soul resembles the divine, whereas the body resembles the mortal (80a-b). Socrates concludes that when a soul dies in a pure condition, it goes to what resembles it, the 'divine, immortal and wise' (81a), and then dwells with the gods. As an attempt to convince Socrates' friends that the soul is everlasting, the Affinity Argument is the least successful of the arguments in this dialogue. Socrates' friend Simmias

puts forth the following objection (85e-86d): if we have a pair of connected items, one of which is more divine than the other, we should not infer that the divine member of the pair lasts longer, let alone that it lasts forever. The counterexample he gives is the tuning of a musical instrument: the attunement is more divine than the physical components of the instrument, but it is nonetheless temporary, for if the instrument is destroyed its tuning perishes with it. But the Affinity Argument nevertheless makes an important contribution: by showing the similarity or affinity between the soul and divine objects, it supports calling the soul not merely indestructible but immortal.

Godlikeness was a feature of the very first attempt in Greek philosophy to prove the immortality of the soul, by the scientist, medical writer and philosopher Alcmaeon of Croton. The surviving testimony suggests that a crucial premise in his argument was the similarity between the soul and constantly moving 'divine' items: the sun, moon, stars and the entire heavens.⁶ It is hard to be sure how exactly Alcmaeon got from this premise of similarity to the soul's immortality, particularly as his argument, as it is reported, resembles the argument in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Plato's argument may have coloured later accounts of Alcmaeon.⁷ But it is possible that Alcmaeon's aim was not merely to show that the soul lasts forever (which in Homer is already assumed): he may have intended to show that it fully deserves to be called 'immortal', a term which in Homer is reserved for the divine, and perhaps this, not everlastingness, is what the similarity between the soul and divine items was meant to show. But we can understand why philosophers after Plato would have interpreted Alcmaeon's argument for 'immortality' as an argument for everlastingness.

The discussion above might suggest that we can unite Plato's discussions of immortality as follows: (1) being everlasting and (2) being, in some further sense, godlike or 'akin' to the divine are necessary, and jointly sufficient, conditions for immortality, but neither (1) nor (2) is an individually sufficient condition. That would be an attractively precise conception of Platonic immortality, but it is not true to all the passages where immortality is attributed.⁸ Sometimes Plato uses immortality without any

⁶ Aristotle *On the Soul* 1.2.405a29-b1; Aëtius 4.2.2; Cicero *On the nature of the gods* 1.27; Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* 11.28.7-10; Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 5.66; Diogenes Laertius 8.83. For important discussion of Aëtius' testimony, see Mansfeld 2014.

⁷ For discussion, see Barnes 1982: 116-20; Hankinson 1998: 30-3; Mansfeld 2014.

⁸ In what follows directly, I consider a case where (1), everlastingness, is not necessary. For a case where (2), godlikeness, is not necessary, see, for example, the 'immortal' unjust person in *Gorgias* 481a-b, quoted on p. 35 below.

suggestion of everlastingness, such as in the discussion of divine rule in the *Laws*. When in the *Laws* the main speaker, not Socrates but an unnamed visitor from Athens, considers what should be the sovereign element in a city, he is keen to prevent it being a group of people, or a single person, who look to advance their own interests, such as a monarch or an oligarchic clique. To distance the discussion from conventional regimes, such as monarchy and aristocracy, he tells a story about an age when the god Cronos installed lesser deities as leaders of humanity (713b-e). The moral of the story is that even now human cities should have an ‘immortal’ ruler, which means submission to the ‘immortal’ part of human beings (713e-714a):

Even now this story says, and truly, that if a city is ruled not by a god but by a mortal, its citizens cannot escape evils or suffering. Instead, the story supposes, we should do all we can to imitate the way of life said to be at the time of Cronos. When we run our households in private, and our cities, we should obey what we have of immortality within us, giving the name ‘law’ to the provisions of reason.⁹

Plato sidelines the question of which people, or how many, should rule, and emphasizes instead the different aspects of the human being: reason, or the desire for one’s own pleasures (714a). When the Athenian singles out reason as the divine, or immortal, part, he is not trying to show which part of the human being is the most long-lived, or everlasting, but which part is most reliable as the bearer of political authority, and whose rule would resemble the entirely reliable and entirely benevolent rule of deities. Reason is treated, as often in ancient philosophy, as desiderative rather than motivationally inert: whether in a god or a human being, reason is motivated to pursue goodness throughout the entire item for which it is responsible, and in politics this means the entire city. Whether this aspect of the human being lasts forever is irrelevant; even if our reason were annihilated at death, it would still be the part of us enabling approximation to divine supervision.

As we will see at the end of the chapter, in the *Timaeus* Plato considers how an item of only finite duration, the human being, can be immortalized. Here and in the passage from the *Laws*, everlastingness is simply not a consideration in attributions of immortality; by contrast, the formal proofs of the soul’s immortality aim to show that the soul lasts forever.

⁹ The Greek word translated as ‘reason’ is νοῦς. Menn 1995: 14 argues for that translation.

When we consider individual passages in more detail, we should not try to force Plato's discussions of immortality to cohere as a unit.

2 The Value of Lasting Forever

One reason why it is important to distinguish between everlastingness and resembling gods in other ways is that they differ in value. Resemblance to gods is normally a good, and in some of Plato's later dialogues it is presented as the ethical goal for which people should strive.¹⁰ Most obviously, resembling a god by sharing his, or its, moral and intellectual virtues is a good. But resembling gods purely by lasting forever is not in itself good or bad. It would certainly be good to last forever with the moral and intellectual properties of a god, but merely lasting forever is neutral. This will be important for understanding the consolatory aspect of Plato's arguments about immortality: showing the soul to be immortal should not, in itself, be comforting or reassuring.

A broad range of Platonic passages shows that everlastingness is not a good *per se*. The most familiar passage is about an immortal soul. After the Last Argument in the *Phaedo*, Socrates suggests that the immortality of the soul should alarm, not comfort, some people (107 c-d):¹¹

If death were separation from everything, it would be a godsend for wicked people to die, and thus to be separated from the body and at the same time, by also losing their soul, from their own vice. As it is, however, since the soul is evidently immortal, it could have no means of safety or of escaping evils, other than becoming both as good and as wise as possible.

He does not suggest that everlastingness provides some benefit or positive value of its own to offset the negative value of a soul's unending vice.

More often, however, the point is made by imagining an immortal human being, not an immortal soul. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates imagines – without endorsing such behaviour – what we should do if we wanted to harm most severely someone guilty of injustice. *If* we had such malevolent intentions, we should keep the person unjust, and for as long as possible (481a-b):

If his unjust actions are worthy of death, we should ensure that he does *not* die – ideally that he never dies, and is immortal in his wickedness. Failing that, that he lives for as long as possible with such a character.

¹⁰ See Sedley 1999. ¹¹ Compare *Laws* 959b.

Injustice increases in negative value for the unjust person by being prolonged over time, and so the worst fate imaginable for such a person would be to exist forever with that vice. Here again there is no suggestion that being everlasting would go some way towards compensating the person; on the contrary, everlasting vice is thought to be even worse for him than merely a long life of it.¹² Similarly in the *Laws*, the Athenian visitor imagines a human being living forever without virtue but with the 'so-called' goods, such as health, physical beauty and wealth (661b-c). The presence of these 'goods' and sense-perception shows that he has in mind an immortalized human being, with a body and possessions, not a soul.

Sight, hearing, perception and living itself are a very great evil for someone who is immortal for all time and possesses all the so-called goods, but not justice and virtue in general; but they are a lesser evil if one lives on with such a character for the shortest time possible.

In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates discusses which forms of knowledge are beneficial, and suggests that knowing how to make people immortal would offer no benefit unless one knew what to do with, or, as he puts it, 'use', immortality (289a-b). This suggests a lack of benefit in immortality itself, not just in the relevant knowledge, except for people who understand how to spend well an immortal existence. It may seem oddly un-Platonic to envisage immortality as the endless existence of human being, with body and soul unendingly conjoined. But he is responding to what he presents as a popular view of immortality as a good: according to the Athenian in the *Laws*, 'it is said' that acquiring the so-called goods, such as wealth, and then becoming a tyrant and, on top of all that, becoming an *immortal* tyrant would be 'the utmost bliss' (661a-b), and that is obviously a fantasy of an endlessly extended human life.

The evaluative neutrality of everlastingness helps us understand why Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul are consistently supplemented by speculation about what the soul's post-mortem future will actually involve. The continuation of existence is not, in itself, a proper source of comfort; it is essential to show that the soul will somehow be benefited after death.¹³ Consider in this light the structure of the *Phaedo*, where the discussion does not begin with arguments for the soul's

¹² Compare *Gorgias* 512a-b.

¹³ When Williams 1973: 83 considers the 'claim' that death is not an evil, he says the following: 'notoriously, there have been found two contrary bases on which that claim can be mounted: death is said by some not to be an evil because it is not the end, and by others, because it is.' His description of the first 'basis' misrepresents Plato.

immortality. After his discussion of suicide,¹⁴ Socrates tells his friends that he expects, after death, to join the company of benevolent gods (63c) and to gain the philosophical understanding or wisdom that the body impedes during life (66e-67c). He does not try to show that the soul is immortal until *after* he has made these claims about the afterlife. Within the fiction of the dialogue, the debate about the soul's immortality arises from a challenge put to him by Cebes (70a-b), but of course Plato has chosen to construct the conversation in this order. By placing before the discussion of immortality an account of the discarnate soul's gaining wisdom, Plato avoids suggesting that Socrates' goal, in showing the immortality thesis, is merely to show the continued existence of his soul, as if that were a *per se* good. Socrates is not trying to cling to existence for existence's sake. His aim is to support his expectation of gaining wisdom or understanding – a genuine good – after death; that expectation presupposes the immortality of the soul, and so the immortality thesis must be defended.

This also has a bearing on the discussion of immortality in the *Symposium*. Socrates' speech about love in that dialogue describes people as pursuing immortality, or at least an approximation of it. He does not disparage that pursuit; on the contrary, the most admirable people are those who have been most successful in satisfying the desire for immortality. The neutral value of being everlasting, in itself, suggests that he ought to mean that people desire not simply to exist forever, but to do so *in the possession of good things*.¹⁵ The main textual evidence in support of that is the statement by Diotima, whom Socrates represents as teaching him about love and immortality, that people desire immortality 'with the good' (207a).

From what we have agreed, a mortal must desire immortality with the good, since love is for the good to belong to one forever. From this claim, then, love must be of immortality.

Diotima refers to her earlier agreement with Socrates that people want to possess the good 'forever' (206a). There seems a risk of ambiguity between (1) desiring to possess the good for as long as one exists and (2) desiring to possess the good for all time;¹⁶ only the second requires immortality if it is to be satisfied, which suggests that Diotima must mean (2), the more audacious claim. As we just saw, according to the visitor in the *Laws* some people think it would be supreme bliss not only to possess the

¹⁴ See [chapter 7, section 2](#). ¹⁵ See Sheffield 2006: 82, 92–3; Lear 2007: 107.

¹⁶ See Price 1997: 17–18.

supposed good of being a tyrant, but also to possess it for all time by being immortal; Diotima suggests that immortality features like this in all desire for the good, although people have different views about which things are good, and fortunately some people do not take that view of the value of tyranny. Our desire for good things, no matter which things we identify as good, is not conditional on our future existence – we simply want to acquire the good and to go on possessing it. The unconditional nature of our desire for goodness would emerge in reflections on suicide: if we ever considered ending our lives prematurely, having good things in prospect would motivate us to go on living.¹⁷

3 Diotima's Lesson: Approximations to Everlasting Possession of Goodness

When Socrates discusses immortality in the *Symposium*, his task is to take his turn in delivering a speech praising love or Eros. Five encomiastic speeches about love have already been given at the party, and the speakers have aimed for an urbane compromise between religious reverence – since the start of the discussion (177a-b), Love has been treated as a god – and playfulness: the comic poet Aristophanes urges the guests to revere the gods and insists that his speech is not merely comedy (193a-b), and the tragic poet Agathon draws attention to the balance in his speech between the serious and the playful (197e). The speakers thus avoid a tone that is too earnestly didactic for a drinking party, while nonetheless recognizing the divine character of their theme. Socrates for his part avoids a didactic pose altogether: he represents himself as passing on to the others the teaching he received from Diotima, whose name ('honouring Zeus' or 'honoured by Zeus') and city (Mantineia, which resembles the Greek word for seer, *mantis*) suggest religious expertise. Diotima's lesson about love contains a description of the god – or rather, she suggests (202e), the lesser deity or spirit, not a god – and then an explanation of how people benefit from being lovers. Before we consider what she says about humans attaining immortality, we should try to understand why she connects love with immortality at all.

Diotima tries to show that the benefit of being a lover is far more profound than sexual pleasure. This does not in itself show an eccentric aversion to the body on her, or Socrates', part: all the previous speakers

¹⁷ Compare Sheffield 2006: 81–2, and the distinction in Williams 1973, chapter 6 between conditional and categorical desires.

have approached the subject in that way.¹⁸ Even Aristophanes, who says most about the physical side of love, suggests that lovers are seeking something more than sex: people really yearn for completeness and to be permanently united with their other half (192d-e). Praising love is more challenging than it might appear, for two other speeches show how love seems to harm people's interests. Pausanias describes lovers spending nights in doorways, in the hope of being admitted by the woman or boy they love, making supplications and enduring a kind of slavery (183a). He is exploiting the literary stereotype of the lover shut out from his beloved, begging for admittance and being humiliated by his love, an image of the lover now most familiar from Latin love poetry, but present already in the Greek poetic tradition.¹⁹ The speech of Alcibiades (214e-222b), which follows that of Socrates, shows through personal experience the risk of humiliation. Each speaker, perhaps apart from Alcibiades, must show how the rewards of love outweigh the loss of dignity shown here and familiar from depictions in Greek lyric poetry of the lover's painful experience.

There is, however, a danger in making too strong a case for love. In ancient ethical thought there is a strong connection between the activities one values most highly and the kind of life one leads: from the suggestion that a certain activity is supremely valuable or rewarding, the inference is readily drawn that people should, where possible, devote their entire lives to it. Plato thinks it shows a peculiar character, described by Socrates as a 'democratic' character, to pursue philosophy occasionally and with no special commitment to it, as if philosophy had no more or less value than other pursuits (*Republic* 561d). The danger of praising love, in such a context, is that it might be taken to advocate devoting one's entire life to love affairs, at the expense of political engagement, or intellectual and moral self-improvement. How then can love be praised strongly enough to outweigh the risk of harm to a lover's dignity and social standing, but in such a way as to recognize the value of the other activities that people ought to pursue, such as politics and philosophy?

Diotima's solution, which will be echoed in Plato's other writing about philosophy, is to present politics and philosophy not as alternatives to love but as higher forms of love. Love is a broader term than is usually recognized: according to Diotima, 'we have isolated one particular form

¹⁸ See Halliwell 2016.

¹⁹ For Greek examples, including several predating Plato, see Copley 1981: 7–27. There may be a deliberate echo of this poetic tradition when Socrates waits outside in a doorway (175a); he will turn out to be a different kind of lover, and his refusing to come in, when invited, suggests that the object of his desire or striving is not inside Agathon's house.

of love and give it the name that belongs to the whole, “love” (205b). People who pursue one of the other forms of love should be called ‘lovers’, but are not (205d). When people devote their lives to philosophy or reforming the laws of their city, they are not, like Euripides’ Hippolytus, impiously rejecting love but showing themselves to be a more advanced kind of lover. Even the formidable Lycurgus, ancient lawgiver to the Spartans, was himself a lover, with particularly admired children – namely, the laws of Sparta that created the Spartans’ character and so enabled them to fight off the Persian invasion (209d). The reason why Diotima must rank the forms of love, making some higher than others, and not simply delight in the diversity of love, is that some lives are more valuable than others, and a life devoted to politics or, better still, philosophy is a superior life to one devoted to love affairs in the conventional sense. Again, this does not show Socrates to be more censorious than the other guests – Aristophanes, for example, does not merely distinguish same-sex love from heterosexual love but speaks disparagingly of womanizers (191d). The other speakers too wish to show that they are morally discriminating in their praise of love.

Diotima needs some principle by which to rank the forms of love, and this is where immortality gains its importance.²⁰ Any form of love is an expression of the desire for immortality, and people act upon that desire through different forms of creativity, the most familiar of which is producing biological children.²¹ But there are intellectual and technical forms of creativity as well, such as a craftsman designing a new tool or musical instrument (209a), or a poet creating a poem that illustrates some admirable quality of character, such as justice or courage. Diotima suggests at first that the ‘offspring’ of poets and craftsmen are not poems but ‘wisdom’ and ‘virtue’ (209a), but later she explains that poets really produce *images* of virtue (212a). A contrast she does not bring out is that a practical invention, such as a new lyre, will be an ‘image’ only of its inventor’s skill or ingenuity, whereas a poem can illustrate not only the poet’s own skill, but also the virtue (e.g. the good sense or wisdom) of characters represented in the poem, such as Odysseus and Telemachus. Better still is to produce an offspring that gives rise to virtue in others: in Athens, Solon was the father of laws (209d) that express his own political wisdom (209a) and brought

²⁰ An aspect of love that I do not discuss is the beautiful stimulus to creativity, which should eventually become the Form of Beauty. See Ferrari 1992 and Sheffield 2006: 94–9, 113–20.

²¹ Compare *Laws* 721b–c. When Aristotle discusses immortality or eternity through reproduction (*On the soul* 2.4 415a25–b7; *On the generation of animals* 2.1 731b31–732a1), he explains that what persists is the species or ‘form’, not the individual animal or plant.

about moderation and justice in the city (209a). A well-formulated law is a source of virtue in others as well as an expression of the politician's intellectual virtue. Best of all is to live as a philosopher, who generates virtue directly (212a).²²

The ranking can also be viewed in terms of immortality: some kinds of 'offspring' last longer than others, and so some attempts to attain immortality through creativity are more successful than others. In an extremely rare use of the comparative form of 'immortal' (the only other use in Plato is *Phaedo* 99c), Diotima claims that intellectually creative people have 'more immortal' offspring than people who produce biological offspring (209c), her examples being the poets Homer and Hesiod and the lawgivers Lycurgus and Solon. This is an ingenious attempt to correlate the ethical ranking of lives (where Solon should come near the top) with the offspring's degree of immortality: a better life is one in which the offspring are most 'immortal'. But we may reply that there is simply too much contingency in politics, the transmission of poetry and craftsmanship to count on such a correlation. Good poetry or technical innovations can be forgotten or overlooked entirely. There may be lawgivers whose reforms were equal to Solon's but short-lived, perhaps because of the next generation of politicians or because of foreign invasion. We might also object that politicians should not always look to act like Solon or Lycurgus: if, when one first takes office, the city's laws are already thorough and appropriate for its needs and welfare, the correct use of power is not to leave one's stamp upon the city through wide-ranging changes. Plato recognizes this point in his *Republic*, where the ideal rulers, philosopher-kings and -queens, who rule a just city, typically aim to *preserve* its laws: in such a city, people need 'guards of the laws' (421a), not interventionist lawgivers striving to create a personal legacy.

Another difficulty lies in spelling out exactly how offspring, biological or intellectual, provide immortality or an approximation to it. Consider the contrast between the following:

Offspring are bearers of our identity (BI) or at least proxies for us. In desiring immortality, each of us wants personal survival into the future, and offspring provide that or an approximation of it.

Offspring are sources of goodness (SG). In desiring immortality, each of us wants to possess good things in the future, and by creating offspring we leave items in the world that will provide us with good things.

²² In what follows immediately, I focus on cases other than philosophy, as Diotima says more about how poetry and politics bring people close to immortality-with-goodness.

If we wish to generalize across biological and intellectual generation, the textual evidence is indeterminate between BI and SG. The importance of goodness in Diotima's account of immortality – people want to possess immortality 'with the good' (207a) – suggests SG. The discussion of intellectual creations also favours SG. Solon and Lycurgus are not said to *be* their laws, or to live on through their laws, but to receive honour and fame on account of them: 'you Athenians honour Solon because he fathered your laws, and men are honoured in many other places, among both Greeks and foreigners, because through many fine achievements they fathered virtue of every kind' (209e). (Diotima has already mentioned at 208c how keenly people desire fame.) Such politicians can even receive religious recognition (209e). When discussing Homer and Hesiod, Diotima does not suggest that they 'are', or are represented by, their poems, but that their poems provide the poets with 'immortal glory and fame' (209c-d). In describing fame in this way, Diotima is trying to echo epic usage, although in Homer such fame is called 'imperishable', not 'immortal'.²³

By contrast, in the discussion of biological offspring it sounds as if BI is the incentive. We want to carry on existing, and the closest we can come to doing so is by leaving behind proxies (207c-d):

The same argument applies: mortal nature seeks to exist forever and to be immortal, so far as it can. The only way in which it is possible is by generation, because it always leaves behind a different new mortal instead of the old one.

Diotima then tries to support her point by showing that even during life constant replacement underlies the apparent continuity of one organism (207d-208b): constituents of the body, such as blood and hair, are constantly being replaced, and in the soul desires, pleasures and so on are constantly arising and disappearing. Even concerning knowledge, she suggests, there is constant replacement: when people need to revise and go back over something they used to know, they are not activating dormant knowledge but replacing knowledge that has departed with new knowledge. This suggestion of continuity through replacement has nothing to do with the future generation of goods; it seems designed purely to reassure Socrates that people should accept being replaced by biological offspring as a form of continued existence, for the reason that it is not so very different from continued existence during life.²⁴ This is similar to the suggestion in

²³ See [chapter 1, section 3](#).

²⁴ For different interpretations of this passage, see Sheffield 2006: 104–10.

recent philosophy that we can survive our deaths by identifying with the interests of others (including, but not only, our children). As Mark Johnston puts it, quoting John Stuart Mill, we can 'live on in the onward rush of humankind'.²⁵ Johnston presents this not as inevitable for all of us but as a demanding moral *achievement*; here too his account of survival resembles what Diotima says about immortality.

We might think it an advantage of SG that it does not need a theory of identity through replacement. But SG has problems of its own: if the point is merely that, after our death, offspring will provide people with goods, how can the dead Homer or Solon 'possess' the good of being famous or honoured? This might be called the Epicurean challenge: people cannot be benefited or harmed at the time when they do not exist.²⁶ (The immortality of the soul seems to address that challenge, but I will suggest shortly that introducing that notion of immortality undermines the usefulness, to Socrates, of Diotima's lesson.) Unless the Epicurean challenge can be answered, some form of ongoing existence for Homer or Solon must be devised to supplement SG. And the need for future existence is suggested independently by the fact that people's desire for goodness was said to entail a desire for immortality: people want to possess the good at all times, and that was thought to entail a desire never to stop existing. But it is not shown how Homer and Solon have satisfied that second desire, the desire for continued existence.

Perhaps, then, we were wrong to assume that Homer and Solon have *succeeded* in their quest for immortality-with-goodness.²⁷ Maybe it would be better to treat this part of the discussion as showing failed attempts to attain that goal, attempts that fail in different ways. People want to exist forever in the possession of good things; one part of that, future existence, at least by proxy, is secured by means of biological offspring, but with no guarantee of future goods. According to Diotima, men at least (she refers to the motivation of males, not all human beings) have children in order to gain 'as they think' immortality, memory and happiness (208e), and it is worth noting that she does not endorse their hope. ('Immortality, memory and happiness' is not a very neat list, but Diotima may wish to suggest, reasonably enough, that most people who have children have not formulated their hopes or

²⁵ Johnston 2010: 293. See chapters 4 and 5 of his book, which compare his account of personal identity with that of Parfit. At the end of the book (2010: 376), Johnston considers what happens when all human life ends, and the significance of that question is taken up in much fuller detail by Scheffler and Kolodny 2013.

²⁶ See chapter 5 below. For discussion of posthumous harm and benefit in Aristotle, see Scott 2000.

²⁷ See Obdrzalek 2010: 419 and 420.

reasons in precise terms.) By contrast, the most revered poets and politicians create an enduring source of goods, but do not exist to possess them, for the products that provide these goods, such as poems and laws, do not provide the poet or lawgiver themselves with ongoing existence. What becomes immortal is Homer's renown, not Homer himself (209d; compare 208d) – a suitably Homeric way to view renown, as I argued in the [previous chapter](#).²⁸

Viewing poets, parents (in the literal sense) and politicians as failing in their attempt at immortalization is supported by what Diotima says about the philosopher: it is the philosopher who becomes 'immortal, if any human is' (212a), which suggests that he is exceptional in succeeding. Making sense of the philosopher's immortality is itself extremely difficult. In the same passage, the philosopher is said to generate virtue itself, not merely a poetic image of, or a legislative stimulus to, virtue. If the virtue is generated in *himself*, we are not shown how it survives his death.²⁹ If the virtue is generated in *another*,³⁰ such as a pupil, the pupil's survival, should he outlive the philosopher, is subject to the same contingencies as biological children, and the Epicurean challenge returns: how can the pupil's virtue benefit his deceased, non-existent teacher?

One way to understand the philosopher's immortality would be to take Diotima to have shifted to a different conception of immortality: divinity or godlikeness without everlasting existence.³¹ In the [last chapter](#), we saw that such a conception of immortality has antecedents in the Greek poetic and philosophical traditions, and I will argue later in this chapter that it will help us make sense of a passage in Plato's *Timaeus*. But as an interpretation of the *Symposium* it comes at a high cost: immortality-with-goodness has been presented as existing forever in the possession of good things, and broadening the scope of love to politics and philosophy required all forms of love to have that, immortality-with-goodness, as a common goal. Perhaps it does not matter if only one form of love,

²⁸ In the *Phaedrus* (276e–277a), Socrates again distinguishes personal immortality from the immortality of an impersonal, generated item: a dialectical educator sows a 'seed' which passes from person to person and becomes immortal, but the people who benefit from the seed are said to be happy, not immortal. The speech delivered by Socrates and attributed to Aspasia in Plato's *Menexenus* distinguishes between fame and immortality (247d). (I owe the second reference to Obdrzalek 2010.)

²⁹ Sheffield 2006: 108, 146, 149–50 and 164 suggests that the philosopher's immortality does not depend on creating virtue in other people.

³⁰ Price 1997: 52–4.

³¹ The leading account is Sheffield 2006, especially 42 ('godlike life of contemplation') and 146–52. See also Jorgenson 2016: 246.

philosophy, actually attains that goal, but it should attain that for which the other kinds of lover are striving, not something different, for only then will the philosopher be most successful *as a lover*.³² In the *Timaeus*, philosophical self-immortalization, during life, will turn out to mean godlikeness without endless duration (see [section 5](#) below), but in that dialogue philosophy has not been presented as having the same goal as politics, poetry and sexual reproduction. The problem for Plato arises from bringing philosophy into such a relation with these other aspects of human experience, and a philosopher's immortality is easier to understand when philosophy is treated separately from them, as in the *Timaeus*.

Another way to understand the philosopher's immortality is to donate to Diotima the doctrine of the soul's immortality.³³ This too has its cost. It is not that there is an inconsistency between the claims that (1) human beings desire immortality, and only some succeed in attaining it; and (2) the soul is essentially immortal. Simply distinguishing between the human being and the soul removes the inconsistency.³⁴ The problem belongs more to Socrates than to Diotima. Socrates wishes to show that love provides a sufficiently substantial benefit for people to honour and revere the god (212b). Diotima's account of immortality is supposed to show that benefit, in such a way as to make the most admirable lives succeed most in attaining immortality. But if immortality is an essential property of all souls, independently of what people do in their lives, it is no longer clear that becoming lovers yields some great benefit that would otherwise be denied them. 'The question becomes how best to characterize an immortality within mortality whose achievement is desirable even for souls that are themselves fully immortal.'³⁵ And the philosopher is no longer unique or exceptional in being immortal, as Diotima seems to suggest: if immortality is an essential property of the soul, it belongs to all souls, including those of people who take no interest in philosophy. The philosopher may receive goods that are denied to such people, but, according to Diotima, immortality is also part of what makes the philosopher unlike them. So if Plato has, at the time of writing the *Symposium*, already formulated the thesis of the soul's essential immortality, he has good reason to keep it out of sight.³⁶

Before we consider how that thesis of essential immortality informs Socrates' discussion of love in another dialogue, let me summarize what is distinctive in Diotima's treatment of immortality. Immortality is not an

³² But for an alternative account, according to which the philosopher has a different goal from other lovers, see Obdrzalek 2010.

³³ Tanaka 2016. ³⁴ So Gerson 2007: 51; Sedley 2009: 159. ³⁵ Price 1997: 33.

³⁶ For the avoidance of the soul's immortality, see also O'Brien 1984 and Vegetti 2016.

essential property but one that must be strived for.³⁷ Most people reach only an approximation of immortality-with-goodness that falls short, in one way or another, of what they desire. People strive to immortalize themselves, as mortal creatures, not to immortalize their souls. That view of attempts at self-immortalization is compatible, in itself, with the soul's being essentially immortal, but essential immortality threatens to make redundant the pursuit of immortality through intellectual and biological offspring.

4 The Soul's Immortality and the Rewards of Love in the *Phaedrus*

Socrates' argument in the *Phaedrus* for the soul's immortality (245c-246a) is presented in an uninterrupted monologue with no contributions from his interlocutor, Phaedrus. In this respect, it is unique: the arguments in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* (608d-611a) require Socrates' interlocutors to accept each step, whereas Phaedrus responds not to the argument, or to individual steps within it, but to the entire speech of which it is a small and preliminary part. The interlocutors in the other arguments (Simmias and Cebes in the *Phaedo*, Glaucon in the *Republic*) have at least a strong interest in philosophical theory, as their acceptance of the existence of Forms suggests (*Phaedo* 65d, 74b, 100c, *Republic* 476a), but evidently Phaedrus has not committed himself to philosophy, for Socrates prays that he stop wavering and direct his life 'towards love with philosophical discourse' (257b). This suggests that Phaedrus cannot be expected to endorse premises about the Forms or the essential nature of the soul. Phaedrus is eager rather for elegant and original speeches, in this case a defence of Love against the two speeches just delivered against lovers, one written by Lysias and the other extemporized by Socrates. Those two previous speeches sought to discredit lovers, in part by means of the supposed fact that being in love makes one 'mad' or 'ill' (236a-b, 241a): if the great poets of love, such as Sappho and Anacreon (235c), represent the psychology of love accurately, lovers are hardly in the right state of mind to be useful educators, or beneficial in some other way. Socrates starts his defence of love – his palinode or recantation – by suggesting that the value of madness should be reconsidered, and then uses an argument for the immortality of the soul

³⁷ This might seem to be contradicted by Diotima's claim that pregnancy and fatherhood constitute 'the immortal element inside a mortal creature' (206c). It sounds as if immortality is an essential property. But by calling an *activity* our immortal element, Diotima indicates that people have to act if they are to attain immortality or an approximation to it.

to prepare the way for his suggestion, developed at length in the recantation, that the particular kind of 'madness' constituted by Love has benefits extending beyond the end of human life.

At the most basic level of analysis, Socrates' argument for the soul's immortality contains the following steps:

- (1) That which moves itself is immortal.
- (2) The correct definition of soul is 'that which moves itself'.
- (3) From (1) and (2), the soul is immortal.

In what follows, I will have most to say about the first step and the conception of immortality there, although from a philosophical perspective Socrates' claims about the soul are just as interesting: Socrates argues that the soul, in addition to moving itself, is the source of motion in everything that moves, which suggests that the study of the soul will enable philosophers to understand not only human psychology but also the origin of motion across the entire universe.³⁸ Inquiry into the soul may also enable the philosopher to make progress in theology, for if, as seems reasonable to suppose, a god is responsible for his or its own motion, a god must be, or at least contain, a soul, given the definition of soul in (2). (We might object that the soul could be merely one of several types of self-mover, which would leave room for another explanation of divine motion – but then it would be incorrect to *define* the soul as self-mover.) It is hard for us to appreciate how revolutionary it was to think of gods as being, or having, souls. (This is not to deny that there were precedents in earlier philosophy, which had already explored affinities between divine and human intelligence, and according to Aristotle (*On the Soul* 1.2 404a25-b6), Anaxagoras – famous today for having a doctrine of cosmic 'mind' – sometimes spoke instead about 'soul'.) In Homer only mortal human beings have souls; a Homeric god has no need for a soul, as (a) a soul is what passes on death to Hades, and (b) Homeric gods never die. Evidently Plato has noticed the possibility of applying to theology his definition of soul, for Socrates says that he will consider the nature of soul 'both divine and human' (245c), and later in the myth Socrates mentions, without endorsing, a new view of gods as an immortal combination of soul and body (246c-d). Plato's later dialogues, especially the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, will

³⁸ Later, Socrates describes soul as 'caring for all that is without soul, and ranging across the entire world' (246b), and the perfected soul as 'governing the cosmos' (246c). Consult Bett 1999 for the conception of the soul in the argument.

richly expand this suggestion that examining the soul unlocks cosmology and theology.

In this particular context, Socrates takes it that an item is immortal if, and only if, it satisfies two criteria: it is never destroyed, and it never ceases to be active in the ways characteristic of its life. The second is expressed as the soul never ceasing from ‘motion’. If an item is never destroyed and, throughout its existence, is unceasingly in motion, it is ‘always moved’ and so immortal (245c).³⁹ Merely *existing* forever is not, in itself, sufficient for immortality. Imagine a body that is animated by a soul for only a finite time and then, when it is no longer animated, everlastingly preserved. (Maybe scientists invent a freezing process that inflicts no damage on the body.) To quote from Socrates’ argument, ‘by ceasing to move it ceases to live’ (245c), and so, despite the efforts of the scientists, it is not immortal. Contrast the discussion of immortality in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates emphasizes how long the corpse and its parts can last after the soul’s departure (80c-d):

If the body has been shrunk and embalmed, like those who were embalmed in Egypt, then it stays almost whole for an unimaginably long time, and even if the body rots, certain parts of it – bones, sinews and all such things – are still practically immortal, aren’t they?

The Greek expression translated as ‘practically’, in ‘practically immortal’, (ὥς ἔπος εἰπεῖν) resembles the English expression ‘so to speak’, but it is standardly used to mark not figurative language but the possibility of exaggeration, particularly when using expressions such as ‘all’, ‘none’, ‘always’ or ‘never’. Earlier in the *Phaedo* it is used when Socrates says that certain things ‘practically never and in no way’ stay the same (78e).⁴⁰ So when Socrates discusses corpses, he is acknowledging that certain parts of them, despite being impressively long lasting, may not actually last forever – and it sounds as if they would be immortal if they did. By contrast, in the *Phaedrus* an inactive body, or body-part, would not be immortal even if it were truly everlasting.

The first step of the argument can itself be divided into two parts, each of which is indispensable:

- (1a) During its existence, a self-mover never ceases to be moved.
- (1b) A self-mover is never destroyed.

³⁹ For discussion of the alternative reading αὐτοκίνητον, see Rowe 1986: 175; Bett 1999: 428 n.6; Yunis 2011: 137; Mansfeld 2014, n.3.

⁴⁰ Compare *Apology* 17a (‘practically nothing’).

Socrates defends (1a) first: 'only that which moves itself never stops being moved, as it does not abandon itself' (245c). The language of 'abandoning' is vague, but for good reason. Socrates is drawing a contrast with moving items that derive their motion from something else, and does not want to assume any particular view of how one item stimulates motion in another. Sometimes this is by direct physical contact, but magnetic stones (discussed by Plato in *Ion* 533d and *Timaeus* 80c-d) seem to be an exception, and some theological thought prior to Plato suggests that gods can, from a distance, make other things move with their thoughts (Xenophanes B25 and B26). Perhaps a god could 'abandon' another object, as the source of its motion, merely by thinking of something else or deciding that it should no longer move, whereas if I am pushing a trolley I can 'abandon' it, as the source of motion, only if let go or stand still – if I push absentmindedly the trolley is still moved. But something responsible for its own motion could never stop acting upon itself. The claim is still puzzling: why could a self-moving object not refrain from motion for a certain period and then resume moving? We could reply, on Socrates' behalf, that there must be an explanation of why the object resumes its motion, and in a self-moving object the explanation will be internal to it. If the object stops and then resumes moving, there must have been a process, or a series of processes, between the two times whose completion, at the later time, caused motion to restart.⁴¹ In an intelligent object, such as a soul, this may be a process of thinking. That process should itself be treated as a kind of 'motion' for which the object is responsible, and so there has been motion of some kind after all, even during the period between movements across space. This goes beyond what is stated in the argument, but we will see soon that Socrates needs 'motion' to be understood in a very broad sense.

The defence of (1a) is not intended as an independent proof that a self-moving item is immortal: it merely shows that one requirement of immortality, continued motion, has been met. There is a different interpretation of the passage,⁴² according to which Socrates moves fallaciously between

⁴¹ Bett 1999: 428–9 offers a different line of defence: a self-mover that stopped moving would have to be stirred back into motion by a *part* of itself, and that part must have remained in motion.

⁴² See Bett 1999: 428–30. This interpretation is suggested by the summary of the argument in Yunis 2011: 136 ('the always moving always exists') and Mansfeld 2014. Compare the discussion of the *Symposium* on p. 37 above. In antiquity Strato of Lampsacus posed a similar objection to the Last Argument of the *Phaedo*: 'fire cannot be cooled *for as long as it exists*, and maybe in the same way the soul is immortal *for as long as it exists*' (Damascius *On Plato's Phaedo* 1.442). The interpretation of the *Phaedrus* argument that I defend has been set out already by Rowe 1986: 174–5 and in an unpublished paper of Li Fan.

the following two claims, both of which are ways of understanding a self-mover as ‘always’ being in motion:

- A self-mover moves for as long as it is a self-mover.
- A self-mover moves forever.

I suggest, however, that Socrates does not take himself to have reached that second claim yet. Defending (1a) is intended merely to show that, for as long as a self-mover exists and is a self-mover, it moves. We need not suppose that Plato is confused about the sense in which self-movers ‘always’ move.

The immortality of a self-mover is not shown until Socrates shows (1b) as well as (1a). His defence of (1b) is to show that (1bi) a self-mover cannot be generated, but (1bii) the existence of a self-mover is necessary for the world-system to continue moving. On the assumption that the world-system will continue moving forever, there must always – that is, at all times in the future – be a self-mover to initiate movement within it. But as no new self-movers will ever be generated (from 1bi), the self-movers currently existing must always exist. Like the rest of the argument, the defence of (1bi), the denial of generation, is stated very concisely. A self-mover is responsible for every kind of motion it undergoes, and coming into existence, or being generated, is one kind of motion.⁴³ (This shows that the word ‘motion’ must be understood in a very broad sense.) So if it comes into existence, it must be responsible for that process. But supposing the self-mover to come into existence requires us to assume that *another* item, prior to it, was responsible for its generation. As a self-mover, it is the ‘principle’ responsible for all its motions, but something that came into existence must have been generated from, or by, something other than itself. In other words, an item cannot both be a self-mover and generated.

Socrates has prepared for (1bii), the role of self-movers in sustaining the world’s motion, by claiming that self-movers are ‘the source and principle of motion for the other things that are moved’ (245c). He does not say what entitles him to assume that the world-system will run on and on forever.⁴⁴ The immortality of the gods, as that is understood in Greek literature and religion, suggests that there will always be a functioning system for them to inhabit,⁴⁵ but in the [previous chapter](#) we have seen that Empedocles both denies the everlastingness of this world-system and retains the immortality

⁴³ See Bett 1999: 432–3; *Laws* 894b.

⁴⁴ For a similar assumption in the Cyclical Argument for immortality, see *Phaedo* 72a–d.

⁴⁵ I owe this suggestion to Li Fan.

of the gods, although with a different conception of their immortality. So it is not unreasonable to expect Socrates to address that alternative. Socrates also fails to discuss the number of self-movers that the continuity of cosmic motion requires. Are all the self-movers currently in existence necessary, or would a smaller number (perhaps as low as one) suffice? (This alternative – one soul sufficient to move the entire system – puts us in mind of the so-called ‘world-soul’ of the *Timaeus*.) Unless *all* the self-movers are needed, some or maybe even most of them could perish without jeopardising the motion in the rest of the world. So while the argument promises to show that ‘all soul is immortal’ (245c), it has not succeeded in showing that *every* self-mover must be immortal. Socrates has argued that fresh self-movers will never enter the world, and it would certainly be depressing to imagine a world that keeps moving forever with fewer and fewer self-movers or souls within it (but never zero). But Socrates has not shown that depressing future, of a world increasingly but never totally denuded of souls, to be impossible.⁴⁶

The definition of the soul as the self-mover, step (2), is defended through a contrast between the soul and the body: ‘every body that receives its motion from outside is soulless, whereas the body that gets its motion from within, out of itself, is ensouled, as this is the nature of soul’ (245e). It looks a formidable challenge to show that the soul is responsible for its ‘motions’ in the broad sense mentioned above, where coming-into-existence is itself treated as a kind of motion, and here the contrast with bodies seems to refer only to sources of locomotion (that is, motion from one place to another). The difficulty for Socrates is that his argument, at point (1b), depends on the soul, as a self-mover, bearing responsibility for *all* its motions, but in principle an item responsible for its own locomotion (and other ‘motions’, such as cognitive processes) could nonetheless derive at least one of its other ‘motions’ from something else. Put more simply, something could be a self-mover in respect of some motions but not all. On a literal reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*, that is its view of the rational part of the

⁴⁶ Compare Bett 1999: 434. Bett then suggests that Socrates may be conceiving of soul as a ‘kind of stuff’, comparable to water or electricity (1999: 436–7). If so, it is better to describe the passage as showing the immortality of ‘soul’, not ‘the soul’. Bett suggests that on this interpretation the argument is more satisfactory: ‘for if this stuff is responsible for all γένεσις [i.e. coming to be] in the universe, the destruction of this stuff would immediately result in the universe’s collapse; and from this it does indeed follow, on Plato’s assumptions, that the stuff will necessarily not perish’. But the immortality of *individual* souls is still not demonstrated. For a parallel, imagine that (1) the continued existence of human life on earth requires water and (2) human life on earth will continue endlessly into the future. From this it does not follow that the puddle of water in my garden, or the water at the bottom of my glass, will last forever.

soul: the rational soul initiates its own locomotion and cognition, but it was brought into existence by a rational deity that is not a soul (34c-36d, 41d). The process of coming-to-be is thus distinguished from the processes that a soul can initiate in itself or in bodies.

I have suggested that the problems in the argument do not lie in a simple confusion about the soul's 'always' being in motion. The difficulties are rather as follows: (a) Socrates does not explain whether all souls are equally responsible, or indispensable, for the motions of the world-system, and (b) showing souls to be responsible for their own locomotion does not show that they are responsible for *all* their own 'motions', in the broad sense that includes generation. It seems to me no accident that in the *Timaeus*, where both these topics – soul and cosmic motion, soul and generation – are taken up and examined in more detail, the cosmological account *denies* that the soul is intrinsically, or essentially, immortal. According to *Timaeus*, the soul's immortality depends on the benevolence of the rational god who created it (41a-b, discussed in [section 5](#) below). Despite my critical comments on Socrates' argument for immortality in the *Phaedrus*, it is hard not to admire Plato for focussing, in another text, on precisely the areas where the argument is most problematic and suggesting (partly, I suggest, in the light of them) a different view of the soul's immortality.⁴⁷

According to Socrates' argument in the *Phaedrus*, it is impossible to be a soul without both lasting forever and engaging in motion forever. Socrates' attempt to show this does not single out rational or intellectual kinds of motion, and in the account of the afterlife that follows he describes all the parts of the soul continuing after death; in his famous depiction of the soul as a charioteer with two horses, each part of the soul outlasts separation from the body. By contrast, his discussion of immortality in the *Republic* seems to suggest that only the rational part of the soul survives death (611a-612a), and *Timaeus* explicitly indicates this (see [section 5](#) below).⁴⁸ But if, as in the *Phaedrus*, one starts from the soul as a self-mover, non-rational or sub-rational sources of motivation look as immortal as the soul-part that motivates the pursuit of knowledge, for the former, no less than the latter, are sources of motion in the entire organism. This

⁴⁷ Another consideration in the *Timaeus* against the soul's immortality is its being a composite. One argument in the *Phaedo* for the soul's immortality takes the soul to be incomposite (78b-80b), and in *Timaeus* the creator god says that everything bound together can be taken apart (41a-b). *Timaeus* also suggests that, even if one sets aside the non-rational parts of the soul, the intellectual activities of the rational part require it to be a composite in itself. See Sedley 2009: 155–6.

⁴⁸ See Woolf 2012.

suggests that even the sources of motivation that seem bound up with mortal, embodied existence – such as the desire for bodily pleasure – are immortal. Immortality belongs intrinsically to even the least godlike parts of the soul, and is not, as in the *Symposium*, a mark or reward of ethical achievement. We can put the same point in terms of different kinds of soul: a soul devoted exclusively to bodily pleasures is no less a soul or a self-mover, and so no less immortal, than the soul of a philosopher or admirable politician.

Diotima's attempt to balance the praise of love with ethical and political evaluation relied on the thought that immortality must be achieved, and is achieved to a greater extent by people with more laudable lives. Only then will there be the proper correlation between the pursuit of love, successful or unsuccessful, and the ethical quality of a person's life. As I have already said, it is possible to combine an account of achieved immortality with an account of immortality as something essential or conferred by a god, for example by distinguishing between what achieves immortality (such as the human being) and what is essentially immortal, or has its immortality somehow guaranteed (such as the soul or a part of it) – and the *Timaeus* will try to reconcile different kinds of immortality in roughly this way. But Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* does not just present a conception of immortality; it uses that conception to advance a view of love as a contributor to human welfare. The ethically modulated praise of love is endangered if immortality is not an achievement but an essential property of the soul: what makes philosophers or politicians more successful than others in their pursuit of love, if everyone's soul is, independently of what they do, immortal? Plato must show either that people with essentially immortal souls can nonetheless somehow achieve immortality through love, or that love yields rewards that are different from immortality.

The second of these is chosen when Socrates returns in the *Phaedrus* to the praise and defence of love: the reward of love is not immortality, despite what Diotima had taught him, but cognitive access to the Forms and resemblance to a god.⁴⁹ In the imagery of the myth, a soul stimulated by love develops 'wings', which will allow it, after three philosophical lives, to escape incarnate existence altogether, when it will rejoin the company of the gods and contemplate Forms with them. Later in the dialogue, Socrates suggests that this speech, apart from its illustration of dialectical collection and division, was given in a spirit of 'play' or 'recreation' (265c-d): 'perhaps we got hold of something true, but maybe we were led in the wrong

⁴⁹ For immortality in *Phaedrus* 258c and 277a, see n.28 and n.51.

direction as well, when we mixed together a not entirely unpersuasive speech, and offered in play a mythological hymn, fitting and reverent, to Love, your master and mine, Phaedrus, who watches over beautiful boys' (265b-c). Plato thus avoids giving Socrates a strong commitment, within the fiction of the dialogue, to the accuracy of the myth; Socrates is least tentative when describing its reverence towards Love, not its truth. All the same, the project of re-imagining love in a speculative eschatology is worth undertaking: we have seen why Plato would wish to suggest that, on a view of the soul as essentially immortal, love is not redundant and can still be shown to offer substantial rewards.

We can also see why Plato should avoid suggesting that there is an *automatic* epistemic reward from love – that is, that lovers gain philosophical knowledge simply by falling in love. There seems plenty of evidence against that, and such a view would not recognize the importance of the learner's labours in gaining knowledge, or the difficulty of coming to understand the Forms – themes that recur in Plato's treatments of knowledge and education, such as the image of the Cave in the *Republic* (518b-d). So it is with good reason he presents the epistemic reward of love not as knowledge but as the means of gaining knowledge, portrayed in the myth as 'wings' that can carry the soul away from corporeal objects and to the Forms. A soul that has become capable of contemplating the Forms is godlike, and the myth depicts such a soul following the gods and, with difficulty, sharing their vision of the Forms (248a). Love stimulates the 'wings' that enable godlike contemplation of Forms, both in the lover (251a-252c) and in the younger person educated by him (255c-d).⁵⁰ If the soul is immortal – which in the palinode means everlasting and constantly active – we can hope for such contemplation to continue, and perhaps be perfected, after death (256b), although, as we have seen, Socrates sounds a tentative or self-critical note when he later reflects on his depiction, in the myth, of what exactly this would involve.

In the [previous chapter](#), I argued that godlikeness and appropriateness for a god can be criteria in attributions of immortality; if we wish to smooth out the differences between Plato's dialogues, this might prompt us to describe the godlike soul that contemplates Forms, or that escapes incarnation, as 'immortal', or 'more immortal' than other souls. But that would be our wording, not that of the *Phaedrus*. Socrates never uses 'immortal' in that way in his recantation: rather, *all* souls are immortal,

⁵⁰ A feature of godlikeness developed further in the *Phaedrus* than elsewhere in Plato is coming to resemble a particular god, such as Zeus or Apollo (252d-253c). See Sedley 1999: 315.

and so souls fully immersed in bodily activities and pleasures are no less immortal than godlike souls. He is aware that gods are conventionally distinguished from humans by their immortality: the souls of gods are ‘the so-called immortal’ souls (247b), and the error, marked by ‘so-called’, is not to treat divine souls as immortal but to regard only *some* souls as immortal. Unlike Timaeus, he does not make personal immortalization an achievement, and unlike Diotima he uses terms and concepts different from ‘immortality’ to mark the special achievements enabled by love.⁵¹

5 **Immortalizing the Immortal-Mortal Composite in the *Timaeus***

The cosmology of Plato’s *Timaeus* describes the world as an everlasting, divine environment for both ‘immortal and mortal creatures’ (69c, 92c). When we examine the detail of Timaeus’ account, it becomes evident that human beings do not fall neatly into either side of his immortal/mortal dichotomy. The world itself contains everlasting reason, as the regular and endlessly repeated motions of the heavenly bodies, such as the sun and the stars, indicate; we share in rationality, and to a limited extent we can, during our existence as human beings, emulate divine or cosmic reasoning. On the other hand, if we are to survive as bodily human beings, and if the human species is to endure, we must have desires and appetites of which the world and its divine parts have no need, such as the desires for food, drink and sex (70e); when acting upon these desires, we are not in any sense emulating a non-mortal creature or reasoner. Many aspects of human society, such as politics and cultural achievements, derive from our competitive and self-assertive drives, and these sources of motivation are also redundant outside human (and, we might add, animal) society. So some of our sources of motivation serve a useful purpose only in creatures who, like us, are social, reproduce, benefit from competition with one another and possess bodies in constant need of maintenance. But reason is different: Timaeus argues that the world has not only been rationally designed but is

⁵¹ Shortly after the speech, Socrates describes a lawmaker or king becoming an ‘immortal speech-writer in his city’ (258c). But the context makes a difference. He and Phaedrus are discussing *attitudes* to speech-writers, and whether people really regard written compositions as a source of shame, and here he is describing how someone is regarded if he had both political power and enduring success as an author: as equal to a god. Probably Plato intends a contrast between this person and the dialectical educator described at 277a (mentioned already in n.28 above), and Socrates’ praise of the educator does not attribute personal immortality to him.

a rational self-maintaining system, which suggests that reason and rational thought processes are not a uniquely human possession.

This divide in the human being is expressed as a contrast between the mortal and the immortal. According to Timaeus, we possess both an immortal soul (42e, 43a, 69c), which gives us the ability to reason, and a mortal soul, or rather mortal soul-parts (69c-d, 73d), which motivate the activities of which a divine reasoner has no need, such as eating. In the [previous section](#), we saw that Socrates' argument in *Phaedrus* for the soul's immortality makes every part of the soul, as an independent source of motion, immortal. The difference between Timaeus' cosmological project and Socrates' task in the palinode helps to explain this disagreement between the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus*. Timaeus must explain, as an object of inherent interest, the contribution of the soul to the motions and maintenance of the world. While, as we have seen, Socrates acknowledges the cosmic significance of the soul's responsibility for motion, his task is to explain how the souls of human beings benefit from love, and it does not belong to that task to explore, in detail, exactly how soul 'cares for all that is without soul' across the cosmos (246b). Timaeus undertakes precisely that exploration of soul in the cosmos, which requires him to acknowledge, more fully than Socrates does, the difference between divine souls and the sources of motivation in embodied human beings.

What exactly does Timaeus mean when he calls the rational soul, or (during human life) the rational soul-part, 'immortal'? Its immortality is introduced when the creative god (often called the 'Demiurge')⁵² distinguishes between his own contribution to the human being, which is to provide the immortal component (that is, the rational soul), and the contributions of lesser deities, who 'weave the mortal to the immortal' (41d), supplying the mortal components necessary for completing the human being. The distinction between their contributions is a crucial assertion of the divide in us between the immortal and the mortal.⁵³ The rational soul is described as follows: 'so much of them [i.e. of human beings] as is entitled to share the name of the immortals [i.e. the gods]' (41c). This suggests that the rational soul's immortality can be understood by considering its namesakes, the immortal gods. The gods' immortality has just been explained to them by their creator (41a-b):

Everything that has been bound together can be dissolved, but it is a mark of an evil character to want to dissolve what has been finely joined and is in

⁵² Menn 1995 suggests that Demiurge is not a title of the god so much as a 'placeholder' (66 n.1).

⁵³ This theme of the cosmology is explored in Broadie 2012, chapter 4.

a good condition. So although you are not altogether immortal or indissoluble, since you were generated, you will not be dissolved nor receive a share in death: for you have received a bond – my will – that is even greater and more authoritative than those with which you were joined together when you came to be.

The created gods' immortality relies not only on the fineness of their construction but also on the character of their creator, who has explained that whatever he has made can be unmade only if he wishes it (41a). As gods, they will not be subject to moral or intellectual vices, and so he will never have reason to wish them to be unmade. Given that the rational soul in humans is another product of this creator, the same point about his will and benevolence applies to them. Immortality is here conceived of as being everlasting and (in the case of an item that, like the rational soul, has been bound together) immune to dissolution, and the created gods and the rational soul could in principle be split into their constituents. So they are 'not altogether immortal'; rather, their everlastingness or immortality is guaranteed by their creator.⁵⁴ There is a difficulty in extending to human souls the creator's claim about the gods' souls: divine souls are always 'in a good condition', but human souls are subject to vices and may cease to be in that condition. We could reply that immortal souls in mortal bodies, and with the additional motivations characteristic of mortal creatures, make an essential contribution to the world: within the same speech the creator explains that the world would be incomplete without human beings, as well as the other kinds of organism (41b), and the discussion of the best city that opens the work (17c-19a) reminds Plato's reader of the *political* use of rationality that is a distinctively human contribution to the world. (Gods do not need to reason about marriage, educating their young or private property, and without human beings the world would be devoid of this kind of reflection.) But completing the world requires only that some human beings exist in the world, not that every rational soul, however wicked it has become, remain immortal. In the passage quoted above, the creator also says that only a wicked character would want to destroy what has been 'finely joined', and perhaps this can stand alone as a sufficient reason against destroying any rational soul: even a morally defective soul is still a well-made product, and so will never be destroyed by its creator.

Despite the differences between Timaeus' cosmology and the palinode of the *Phaedrus*, both passages agree in making immortality something that

⁵⁴ Compare Sedley 2009: 153–6.

human beings, or rather their souls, do not achieve: it is either an essential quality of the soul or at least guaranteed by a god. It is surprising, then, to find Timaeus suggesting near the end of his cosmology that immortality can also be achieved (90b-c):

If someone has applied himself to the pursuit of learning and true wisdom,⁵⁵ and has trained these possessions of his above all, it is absolutely inevitable for him, provided that he gets hold of the truth, (1) to have immortal and divine thoughts; and (2) so far as human nature can share in immortality, to receive this in full measure; and (3) since he has always cultivated the divine, and has the deity dwelling in him well-ordered, he must be exceptionally happy.

Timaeus attributes three qualities to this person: (1) immortal ‘thoughts’, (2) immortality and (3) happiness. The first and the third are attributed with no qualification. In the discussion of the first, Timaeus is echoing, and implicitly rejecting, the injunction to think ‘mortal thoughts’ – that is, thoughts appropriate for a mortal.⁵⁶ If someone has truly attained wisdom on a subject, he or she will think about it as a god would think, and this shows admirable intellectual achievement, not impiety or arrogance. Concerning the third, happiness, Timaeus exploits the connection in Greek between the deity responsible for one’s welfare (δαίμων) and happiness (εὐδαιμονία, having that ‘deity’ ‘well’-disposed). He has just suggested that the rational soul is that deity (90a) in each of us, and now, in an etymological pun, he says that those who order ‘well’ their ‘deity’ are the most ‘happy’.⁵⁷ Only in the second is there a suggestion of approximation: the person becomes immortal so far as human nature allows. Here he acknowledges what the cosmological account has developed at great length: whereas the rational soul in each of us is immortal, the human being is an immortal-mortal composite, consisting of a body, a rational soul and other sources of motivation that are bound up with mortal existence. Such a combination could not become fully immortal.

It is the entire human being, not the soul or a part of it, who is, to some extent, immortalized; otherwise, the limitations imposed by ‘human nature’ would not be relevant. The conception of immortality here cannot mean or include everlastingness, for all human beings, no matter how much knowledge they gain, have only a finite duration. Indeed, immortality cannot even mean greater duration: consider two people, one long-

⁵⁵ The Greek is plural (‘true wisdoms’), and I take this to mean wisdom or knowledge concerning a range of subjects (knowledge of x, knowledge of y, and so on).

⁵⁶ See chapter 1, p. 13. ⁵⁷ See Sedley 1999: 320.

lived and ignorant, the other short-lived but knowledgeable in the way envisaged by this passage. Clearly, the immortalized person would be the second, not the first – even if the first lived as long as Elina Makropulos. What Timaeus means by ‘immortalization’ is shown, in part, by the contrast with the people who have made themselves as ‘mortal’ as the immortal-mortal compound can be (90b):⁵⁸ they have encouraged and stimulated the mortal parts of their soul, and made them ‘grow great’, at the expense of the rational part of their souls. The immortalized person, by contrast, has fostered the rational or immortal part. But in the passage quoted above, Plato makes Timaeus add a further requirement: the person has ‘got hold of the truth’. It is not enough to devote oneself to the practice of philosophy; one must *succeed* and think as a god would think. Immortalization requires real similarity to the gods in respect of cognition, not merely the aspiration for it.

An alternative view of the passage is that immortality involves *identifying* oneself with the rational soul.⁵⁹ This captures well the priority that the exercise of reason will have for the immortalized person. But in other respects, that interpretation is both too demanding and not demanding enough. It is too demanding in that it requires the person to think of himself or herself as a rational soul, whereas it is compatible with what Timaeus says for immortalized people to think of themselves, in their self-image or self-definition, as immortal-mortal composites (that is, after all, the correct view of human nature), while nonetheless devoting as much time and energy as possible to the activities of reason. In other words, the person should give their rational soul a special value and priority, but need not locate their entire identity within it. And Timaeus demands something that a person with such a self-definition could lack: objective success in attaining knowledge or wisdom. Someone could think of himself as a rational soul while nonetheless being ignorant about Forms, the gods and the cosmos, and failing to ‘get hold of the truth’; if so, he would fail to ‘immortalize’ himself, according to Timaeus.

It may seem disconcerting that Timaeus could switch from a conception of immortality as being everlasting and indissoluble, in his account of gods and the rational soul, to one in which it means developing one’s immortal component, and possessing godlike thoughts and wisdom, within a finite

⁵⁸ The claim that people can make themselves *mortal* ‘so far as is possible’ (90b) confirms that we are not mortals who can attain a measure of immortality (as Diotima suggests). We contain both the immortal and the mortal, and it is this peculiar combination that can be made, to an extent, either immortal or mortal.

⁵⁹ See Sedley 1999: 320, 2009: 158.

human lifespan. We may also be tempted to revisit the *Symposium* and argue that if Timaeus can operate, in a single text, with different understandings of immortality, Diotima should be allowed to do so as well. But this would miss a fundamental difference between them: Diotima needs a unitary conception of immortality if philosophers, politicians and biological parents are all to be treated as lovers with a common goal. There is no such constraint on Timaeus: he can allow that the philosophers who immortalize themselves, so far as is possible, during life have different goals from other people.

6 Summary and a More Contextualized Explanation

Plato's arguments for the soul's immortality might give the impression that he always uses 'immortal' to mean 'everlasting', but we saw that sometimes, such as in the discussion of divine rule in the *Laws* or human immortalization in the *Timaeus*, the word marks divinity or similarity to the divine more than everlastingness. I then argued that Socrates in Plato does not treat everlasting existence as a good in itself. The neutral value of prolonged existence, even everlastingly prolonged existence, explains the structure of the consolation offered in the *Phaedo*: Socrates first suggests that his soul will gain understanding after death, and then, by means of the arguments for the soul's immortality, defends his own assumption that the soul will survive death. He does not start by showing the everlasting existence of his soul as if it were in itself a good or a source of comfort.

I then compared the discussions of immortality in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*. Diotima vastly expands the scope of love and then uses the idea of a common pursuit of immortality, or immortality with goodness, to show which lovers succeed most. Philosophers do best in their pursuit of immortality; interpreting the philosophers' immortality as divinity or godlikeness without everlastingness is attractive in itself but cannot be squared with her suggestion that philosophers and other kinds of lover have the same goal. In this respect, the *Timaeus* offers a clearer account of the philosopher's immortalization as an achievement made within a life of finite length; Timaeus, unlike Diotima, does not need to maintain that philosophers, poets and biological parents have the same goal. But this is not the only conception of immortality in Timaeus' speech, for earlier he describes the immortality of the rational soul as its everlastingness and immunity to dissolution. Finally, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates holds that an immortal item is something that by its own nature lasts forever and never stops being active. Socrates' recantation there

suggests that the benefit offered by love is not immortality – which all souls necessarily possess – but resemblance to a god and understanding of the Forms, or rather the means of gaining that understanding. Whereas *Timaeus* treats immortality first as a quality of all rational souls and then as a demanding achievement that not everyone makes, in the recantation of the *Phaedrus* Socrates does not introduce the idea of immortality as an achievement made only by some people or some souls.

My main objective has been to draw attention to these contrasts, and I have said less about why these dialogues present contrasting accounts of immortality. We have seen one way in which the dramatic context of the *Symposium* bears on Socrates' account of love there, even though the credit is given to his previous lessons with Diotima: Socrates' task is to praise love with a combination of playfulness, religious reverence and moral discrimination. He, or Diotima, includes the last two in the praise of love by arguing that the most successful lovers are the most admirable human beings, achieve most in the pursuit of immortality and earn the gods' love (212a). Can we go further and give a contextual explanation of the contrasts explored above, particularly that between achieved and essential immortality? To some readers, this will be more attractive than any suggestion of Plato revising or correcting his earlier accounts of immortality. I offer the following to illustrate how a project of more deeply contextualized interpretation could get started.

In two contexts, the *Symposium* and *Timaeus*, the suggestion of human beings striving for, and achieving, immortality speaks to a theme about human limitations and the bounds of proper ambition. Before Socrates praises love in the *Symposium*, Aristophanes has already presented a story of gods punishing excessive ambition on the part of human beings (190b-d): humans tried to attack the gods by elevating themselves to the divine level, but were not only cast down but also cut apart. The moral, we might think, is that piety requires us to reduce our ambitions and to aim low. It is a powerful riposte to Aristophanes' story to describe human beings striving for the immortality traditionally associated with gods, not of course through violence but through political and intellectual creativity, and receiving not punishment but, if successful, the gods' friendship and love (212a again). (Socrates makes Diotima respond to Aristophanes more openly at 205e, and at 212c Aristophanes himself notes Socrates' reference to his own speech.) One story of human aspiration is answered by another that shows the gods' open-handedness and lack of envy (compare *Timaeus* 29e), and this requires Diotima to describe a human *striving* for immortality. But at the point at which Socrates begins his recantation in the

Phaedrus there has been no suggestion that humans should limit their ambitions in relation to the gods and divine qualities, and so there is no counterpart to Aristophanes' story that needs answering when the recantation describes human resemblance to the gods. *Timaeus*, however, has a lot to say about the difference between the divine and the human, with respect to both body and soul: our own bodies show unmistakably the limitations to which the world we inhabit, a divine body, is not subject. When he returns to immortality near the end of his cosmology, he responds to and rejects the advice for mortals to think mortal thoughts, and he softens the god/human contrast that he himself has described at such great length: even during embodied existence, we can and should aim not only for divine knowledge or virtue but, so far as our nature allows, for 'immortality' itself. It would be reasonable for Plato to think that a conception of immortality as something to strive towards, rather than as a property we or our souls already possess, has more to offer debates in Greek culture about human aspiration and its limits. In the [next chapter](#), I turn first to one of Aristotle's contributions to those debates.

CHAPTER 3

Immortality and the Ethics of a Finite Lifespan: Aristotle, Early Stoics and Epicureanism

In this chapter I explore three attributions of immortality without everlastingness: Aristotle's discussion of intellectual contemplation, Epicureans on immortal goods and 'imperishable' human beings, and the Stoic Chrysippus on immortal souls and gods. In each case it will be essential to say something about the philosophers' theology, given the connection between immortalization and becoming godlike or divine. Epicureans need to explain, without any suggestion of continued existence after death, how human beings can resemble 'imperishable' gods. Early Stoics face a different problem that Empedocles had already confronted: making sense of the gods' immortality as inhabitants, or parts, of a world-system that will eventually be ended. As we will see, this bears on how Stoics can grant immortality to human beings, or at least to their souls – just as Empedocles' view of the gods' immortality explains how he conceives of his own immortality. But I begin with Aristotle and his exhortation to make ourselves immortal within lives of finite length.

I Immortality in Aristotle's Ethics: False Pieties and a Divine Life

In the last book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle compares a life of intellectual understanding, or 'contemplation', with a life characterized by the moral virtues, such as justice and courage. Neither kind of life expresses every aspect of a human being. There are non-intellectual aspects of human nature, such as emotions and the body, which are not cultivated or fulfilled when people devote themselves to contemplation; similarly, intellect is not fulfilled by the life of moral virtue. But intellect is 'divine', and so, he argues, making it characterize our lives is *both* to prioritize only one part of our nature *and* to make our

lives as good as they can be. This is where Aristotle's ethical writing touches on immortality (10.7 1177b30–1178a2):

If intellect is something divine in comparison with a human being, a life lived in accordance with intellect is divine in comparison with a human life. And one must not obey the advice 'you are human, so think human thoughts' or 'mortal, think mortal thoughts'.¹ No, one must act as an immortal, as far as possible, and leave nothing undone with a view to living in accordance with the best thing one contains. Even if it is small in bulk, in power and value it excels everything – and by a much greater margin.

'Act as an immortal' translates a single word in Greek (ἀθανατίζειν). Translators do not agree on what Aristotle is recommending. In the translation of Roger Crisp, it sounds as if we should do all in our power to become immortal: 'we ought rather to take on immortality as much as possible'. By contrast, Irwin's translation suggests that we should favour what is immortal, or advance its interests, without striving to make ourselves immortal: 'as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal'.² Finally, the translation by Rowe suggests resemblance to immortals, not actual immortality: '[one should], so far as possible, assimilate to the immortals'.³

Aristotle is recommending a particular kind of life in which intellectual understanding is given special priority, and for creatures like us such a life will have a merely finite duration. As in the passage on self-immortalization near the end of Plato's *Timaeus* (see [chapter 2, section 5](#)), with which this Aristotelian passage has been compared,⁴ the *length* of a life makes no contribution, in itself, to 'immortalization': someone who never engages in intellectual contemplation but has an abnormally long life, prolonged (let us imagine) over several centuries, has not come any closer towards what Aristotle is recommending. Everlastingness and, more generally, duration are not at all to the point. So it is hardly surprising that some translators have been reluctant to take Aristotle as exhorting immortalization, or an approximation to it. On the other hand, at first glance the Greek word seems to suggest precisely that, and so other translators have reasonably

¹ See [n.16](#) in chapter 1.

² Crisp 2000; Irwin 1999. With Crisp's translation compare that of Ross 2009: '[we] must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal'. Irwin tentatively suggests (1999: 310) that the verb is modelled on the verbs used to describe supporters of the Persians and Spartans (μηδίζειν, λακωνίζειν). But, as I observe just below, ἀθανατίζειν (or at least a compound verb based on it) is found in Greek authors before Aristotle, namely, Plato and Herodotus, and so the verb should not be interpreted as if Aristotle had coined here.

³ Broadie and Rowe 2002. ⁴ Sedley 1999: 324–6; Reeve 2014: 341.

stuck with 'make oneself immortal', or something similar, and avoided any softening of Aristotle's meaning.

The verb is not new in Aristotle. We might expect earlier Greek usage to clarify Aristotle's meaning, but uses in other authors are not uniform. In Plato, a compound form of the verb (ἀπαθανατίζειν) is used transitively to mean 'make immortal' (*Charmides* 156d). Socrates is entertaining his young interlocutor with a tall tale about Thracian doctors whose knowledge overshadows Greek medicine, and according to him these foreign doctors 'are said even to make people immortal'.⁵ But in the historian Herodotus the same verb is used, now intransitively, of people who merely *believe* themselves to be immortal and act accordingly (4.94).

The Getae think of themselves as immortal (ἀθανατίζουσι) in the following way: they believe that they do not die, but that each one of them who perishes goes to the god Salmoxis.

The Greek word for 'they believe' (νομίζουσι) can point to beliefs or attitudes expressed in concrete action, and Herodotus then describes how the Getae act upon their belief: they send members of their supposedly immortal community as messengers to their god by 'killing' them (as a bystander, but presumably not the Getae themselves, would say) with spears. Herodotus is certainly not endorsing the truth of their belief in immortality. The Getae are said to have various religious eccentricities or even (to a Greek mind) impieties – they try to intimidate their god by firing arrows into the sky, and do not recognize any god except Salmoxis – and, of these outlandish beliefs and practices, belief in their own immortality is the most memorable, eye-catching and easily summarized.⁶

Aristotle himself is said to have used the verb when defending himself against a charge of impiety (Athenaeus 15.697a-b; Athenaeus notes that the speech may not be genuine). He denies according inappropriately divine honours to a mortal, Hermeias.

If I intended to sacrifice to Hermeias as if to an immortal, I would never have made him a monument as for a mortal; if I wanted to immortalize (ἀθανατίζειν) his nature I would not have honoured his body with funeral rites.

⁵ Philo of Alexandria frequently uses the verb in this transitive sense, 'make immortal'. See, for example, *Every good man is free* 109; *On the imperishability of the world* 35; *Special Laws* 1.303. Compare Polybius 6.54.2.

⁶ Later he refers to 'the immortalizing Getae' (5.4), using the same verb. There is a similar intransitive use of the verb in Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius* 8.7.21; for the story, compare Herodotus 1.65): Lycurgus was not put on trial for 'acting as an immortal' or 'thinking of himself as an immortal', even though he did not correct the Delphic oracle when, after deliberating whether to call him a god or a man, Apollo called him a god.

Here the verb could mean either ‘make immortal’ or ‘treat as immortal’; a defendant in such a trial would deny wanting to do either to a human being, and both are incompatible with giving the person funeral rites.⁷ Use of the verb in other texts does not require us to read the *Nicomachean Ethics* as encouraging people to strive for immortality itself. From a purely linguistic point of view, the passage in Herodotus is the closest to that in the *Ethics*, inasmuch as both passages use the verb intransitively, with no direct object provided or assumed, and Herodotus has in mind merely a belief in one’s own immortality (a false belief, in the case he describes) that gives rise to peculiar behaviour.

Let us now return to Aristotle’s *Ethics* and see what has motivated the talk of ‘immortality’ there. At the risk of oversimplifying, I will distinguish between two explanations of his wording, one of which I call doctrinal, the other local, in that it tries to explain his wording by means of the immediate context:

Doctrinal explanation

Aristotle says elsewhere (*On the soul* 3.5 430a23) that active intellect is immortal. His encouragement to ‘immortalize’ can be understood only in light of this doctrine about the intellect: in contemplation we are actively engaging with this immortal part of ourselves.⁸

Local explanation

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle has just cited proverbial advice and wishes his reader not to follow it. His encouragement to ‘immortalize’ replaces the proverbs with better advice, and his wording is chosen to echo the wording of the second proverb (‘mortal, think mortal thoughts’).

Any reading of the passage must acknowledge that Aristotle, like Plato’s Timaeus (*Timaeus* 90b-c), is responding to the proverbial advice to think mortal thoughts. But the doctrinal explanation makes the Aristotelian passage a particularly close descendant of the *Timaeus*.⁹ On the doctrinal

⁷ Contrast Reeve 2014: 338, who suggests that (a) ‘immortalize’ must here mean ‘make immortal’ and (b) this passage should guide the interpretation of immortality in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.

⁸ See Reeve 2014. Aristotle’s lost dialogue *Eudemos* is said to have contained arguments for the soul’s immortality (Themistius *On Aristotle’s On the Soul* 106.29–107.5; Themistius seems to be suggesting that although Aristotle argued for the immortality of the *soul*, his arguments, like Plato’s, can be applied to the *intellect*; for the distinction, see Gerson 2013: 157). In the *Eudemos* one character (probably the leading speaker, and so maybe Aristotle himself – see Cicero *Letters to Atticus* 13.19.4) claimed that the dead are ‘blessed and happy’ (Plutarch *Consolation to Apollonius* 115b-c). Aristotle is also said to have argued for the immortality of the soul in his ‘works in dialogue form’, which may be another reference to the *Eudemos* (Elias *Commentary on Aristotle’s Categories* 114.25–115.12). For a fuller survey of the evidence, see Bos 2003: 238–57.

⁹ Sedley 1999: 326 calls the *Timaeus* passage ‘essential background’ to Aristotelian immortalization.

interpretation, Aristotle takes for granted what Timaeus' cosmology openly states, namely, a divide in the human being between the immortal and the mortal. It might seem an attraction of the doctrinal explanation that it puts Aristotle squarely in a Platonic, or post-Platonic, tradition. But there is a difference between the two passages that so far has not been sufficiently emphasized. Timaeus makes more than one point about immortality (see [chapter 2, section 5](#)): the person who cultivates his immortal part, and succeeds in understanding the truth, both (1) has 'immortal thoughts' and (2) becomes as immortal as possible. (There is then a third point, not expressed in the language of immortality: such a person also becomes happy.) The first attribution, immortal thoughts, echoes and rejects the proverbs quoted by Aristotle; but then Timaeus goes further and adds that the person can, to some extent, become immortal. Timaeus thus makes an additional point about immortality – becoming immortal or receiving immortality – that somehow goes beyond rejecting the self-limitation urged by the proverbs. The same is not so obvious in Aristotle, who makes only a *single* point expressed in terms of immortality. In other words, Timaeus is clearly using the language of immortality to make a point over and above his rejection of the proverbs, but we cannot say that of Aristotle with the same certainty.

The decisive consideration, I suggest, is whether in an ethical context Aristotle himself finds it helpful – independently of his response to the proverbs – to call intellect 'immortal' and the other parts of our nature 'mortal'. (This is not to ask whether Aristotle believes in the immortality of intellect, but what wording best suits his ethics.) It takes only a glance at this part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to see that his preferred terms are 'divine' and 'human', not 'immortal' and 'mortal'. 'Immortal' and 'mortal' are used nowhere else in Book 10. Just before the passage quoted at the start of this section, he describes the life of contemplation as follows: 'such a life will be higher than the human level, for someone will lead his life that way not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as he contains something divine' (10.7 1177b26-8). This life is then compared with the life of moral virtue, and in his evaluation of the latter he describes as 'human' its activities, such as courageous action (10.8 1178a9-14), and the virtues it expresses, such as courage (10.8 1178a20-21). Why does Aristotle favour 'human' over 'mortal'? The answer is probably that 'mortal' would suggest that moral activities and virtues derive their character merely from the fact that we will die. But that is only a small part of the story: we are social and political, we feel emotions and we have bodies that need continual maintenance and are capable of

feeling pain.¹⁰ We are different from the gods in each of these respects, not just in our mortality, and so ‘human’ serves better than ‘mortal’ to label a life that deals optimally with these aspects of our nature. Similarly, when we turn to the gods, we find that they differ from us in respects beyond immortality. It would demean a god, Aristotle argues, to describe him or it as making just contracts, showing courage in the face of danger and so on (10.8 1178b7-23).¹¹ As we have seen in the two previous chapters, in Greek ‘immortal’ can mean or imply ‘divine’, ‘godlike’ or ‘god-appropriate’, but of course it can also mean ‘deathless’. Calling the gods, and the life they lead, ‘immortal’ thus risks suggesting too narrow a view of the distinctive quality of gods – they are not deathless creatures capable of pain, fear, justice and self-control, but rather their activities are purely intellectual. ‘Divine’, not ‘immortal’, is thus the right term for a life that incorporates, so far as possible, the intellectual understanding that gods possess.

This is not to deny that Aristotle would want, in some other context, to explore and even endorse the immortality of intellect. But for his ethical and evaluative purposes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he has good reason to use ‘human’ and ‘divine’ instead of ‘mortal’ and ‘immortal’. That suggests that when he does speak of immortality, there should be a specific counter-consideration – and that, in the passage quoted at the start of this section, is the wording of the proverbial advice to act as a ‘mortal’. No, he says, when setting your intellectual goals you should think of yourself as divine – or rather, to maximize the contrast with the old proverb, as ‘immortal’. In intellectual inquiry this means setting yourself no limits at all. In practice the limitations resulting from being human will sooner or later impose themselves, but that does not mean that *we* should be preoccupied with, and so dominated by, them when launching intellectual inquiries. We can, as it were, leave it to those limitations to assert themselves in the future without letting them frame our scientific or philosophical endeavours. Aristotle is thus trying to capture the self-conception with which we should apply our intellects, and giving an exhortation of his own in place of the would-be pious advice. I suggest that the translation offered in the quotation above (‘act as an immortal’) is more or less correct, although something even closer to the meaning in Herodotus – ‘think of oneself as immortal’ – may be appropriate.¹²

¹⁰ See also the fine outline of mortal existence in Broadie 2007: 114. ¹¹ So Sedley 1999: 324.

¹² Compare Sedley’s interpretation of the *Timaeus* (chapter 2, text to n.59). I think Sedley’s account, and in particular its emphasis on how we conceive of ourselves, captures Aristotle’s meaning very well; I express my reservations about its application to Plato in chapter 2, section 5.

Any interpretation of the passage should recognize one further difference between it and Timaeus' discussion of becoming immortal. Timaeus is describing what happens to someone who understands the truth and fosters his rational soul-part, whereas Aristotle is giving an exhortation.¹³ We might say that, logically, in the *Timaeus* immortality comes in the second part of a conditional (if you achieve this, you become to an extent immortal), but Aristotle could just as well have used the imperative. It is most unlikely that when Aristotle wrote this he failed to notice the echo of the *Timaeus*. But then, on my interpretation, he would think it an advantage of his own account that it reserves immortality for his spirited response to the proverbs, and elsewhere uses 'divine' to describe a life devoted to the intellect.

The closest parallel in Aristotle to the passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is found in the first book of his *Metaphysics* (982b28-983a11). Here he considers whether we should strive for knowledge of causes and first principles in the light of different traditional warnings: 'god alone should have this privilege' (Simonides) and, as poets say, the divine is prone to envy. Neither traditional saying mentions mortality, and Aristotle in his response to them does not speak of mortality or immortality; this provides some confirmation that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* it is the proverbial advice there, not his doctrines concerning the soul, that motivates speaking of immortality. In the *Metaphysics*, as in most of the *Ethics*, he expresses his points through a contrast between the 'human' and the 'divine': such knowledge seems beyond the 'human', and it is pre-eminently 'divine', for its objects are divine, and having this knowledge befits gods especially (982b28-9, 983a5-10). But, Aristotle argues, people who pursue knowledge of first principles need not fear impiety or divine punishment, as the 'divine' is free from envy. Attempts to limit human inquiry can be silenced by means of a different proverb: 'poets tell many a lie.'

2 Imperishable Gods and Immortal Goods in Epicurean Ethics

Epicurus uses two words that could be translated 'immortal': ἄφθαρτος and ὀθάνατος. I will translate the former 'imperishable' and the latter 'immortal', keeping the same translations when I turn to Stoicism in the [next section](#). What role do these concepts play in Epicurean ethics? 'Imperishable', together with 'blessed', is a standard description of Epicurean gods (*Key*

¹³ Reeve 2014: 335 comments well on this aspect of the passage: it is a rare case of Aristotle giving a moral injunction in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Doctrine 1), and, as the gods are a model of perfect blessedness, human beings should strive to resemble them. It does not follow directly from this that the gods should be emulated in respect of their imperishability – perhaps only godlike blessedness should be brought into human lives. ‘Immortality’ (ἀθανασία) is used by Epicurus when he describes what we should stop desiring (*Letter to Menoeceus* 124): there are various ways to think of death as ‘nothing to us’, and the correct way, he says, does not supplement our lives with infinite time but removes the desire for ‘immortality’. It sounds as if ‘immortality’ means infinitely prolonged existence, particularly in the Platonic conception of the soul. As Epicurus rejects this view of the soul (see [chapter 5, section 1](#)), and uses a different term, ‘imperishable’, when describing the gods of his own theology, it seems reasonable to expect ‘immortality’ to play no positive role in his ethics, but to mark only the Platonic delusions that his pupils should avoid.¹⁴ But ‘immortal’ is used later at the end of the same letter in a quite different, non-polemical spirit, to describe the kind of *good thing* that we can and should attain (*Letter to Menoeceus* 135):

Practise the above, and what is akin to it, day and night, both on your own and with someone like you, and you will never be disturbed, awake or asleep, but will live as a god among human beings – for a human being living amid immortal goods bears no resemblance to a mortal creature.

Putting this together with his conception of the gods, we can say that Epicureans are encouraged to emulate something ‘imperishable’, a god or the gods, and to possess goods that are ‘immortal’. The quotation above suggests a connection between the two: someone lives as a god by possessing ‘immortal goods’. In this passage there is no sign of doubt as to whether human beings can possess immortal goods. But it is not explicitly stated that human beings can become immortal (or imperishable). The contrast in the closing words between ‘mortal creatures’ and the possessor of immortal goods could be taken to suggest that the latter ceases to be ‘mortal’. But instead we could take Epicurus to mean that the possessor of such goods is in fact mortal, but no longer gives that impression; we are still dealing with a ‘human being’, as he says. For now, let us note the basic distinction between possessing immortal goods and actually becoming immortal, or imperishable, oneself; we will return later to Epicurean views about the relationship between them.

¹⁴ A later Epicurean text, perhaps the work of Demetrius of Laconia, apparently treats gods as ‘immortal’. To be more precise, it seems to draw a contrast between the gods and perceptible bodies, and says that the latter are not ‘immortal’. See [n.19](#) below.

Next, we should try to understand what Epicurus means when he speaks of the gods as ‘imperishable’. Given that the ‘imperishable’ gods are a suitable object of human emulation, we might try to re-interpret ‘imperishable’ in such a way that it can apply, without equivocation, to humans and gods alike; the gods’ imperishability, as well as their blessedness, could then be achieved by creatures like us. To quote James Warren, ‘we should make sure that we take a similar view of the indestructibility of both god and mortal’.¹⁵ The length of our existence is unavoidably finite, but one way to make imperishability attainable by humans is to understand it as a kind of attitude or mental disposition. Warren relates the attitude specifically to death: the gods do not fear death, and we can learn not to fear death either. On this interpretation, imperishability is an attitude towards death that is compatible with the fact that we die, and so it is a quality that humans too can possess in full. Warren’s summary of this interpretation uses ‘immortal’ rather than ‘imperishable’: ‘if to be immortal is to live without thinking death relevant at all to one’s life, then the Epicurean sage is indeed “immortal”’.¹⁶

It is not hard to see how imperishability, in this sense of dismissing death as irrelevant or not fearing it, could feature in a human life, even though the achievement itself may be demanding. After all, a considerable part of Epicurean ethics is given over to attempts to achieve such fearlessness and foster it in others.¹⁷ The challenge for this interpretation of imperishability is to reconcile it with what Epicureans say about the gods. The logical structure of Epicurean theology is to attribute two properties to the gods, imperishability and blessedness, and to exclude whatever is incompatible with them. These properties gain their special status from belonging to the so-called ‘preconception’ of god – that is, the correct conception of gods that we naturally and inevitably form. If imperishability were merely a mental attitude, Epicurus would have to show that incorrect attributions to the gods are incompatible with their having that attitude. But that is not how his arguments run. Instead, he argues that various properties are incompatible with the gods’ being resilient and strong (*Key Doctrine 1*):

[God] is not subject to expressions of anger or gratitude. Everything of that sort implies weakness.¹⁸

¹⁵ Warren 2000: 245. ¹⁶ Warren 2000: 261.

¹⁷ See chapter 5, section 2. Warren 2004 is the leading treatment of the topic.

¹⁸ Compare *Letter to Herodotus* 78; Cicero *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.45, where ‘imperishable’ is rendered ‘eternal’ (*aeternus*) and then ‘immortal’ (*immortalis*), as it is in Cicero’s Latin translation of *Key Doctrine 1* at 1.85.

The inference is not from some attitude to other attitudes and forms of behaviour, but from physical robustness to attitudes and forms of behaviour (or rather, in the case of anger and gratitude, to their absence). This is strong evidence against the view that Epicureans conceive of the gods' imperishability as fearlessness or some other attitude.¹⁹

So far, I have not addressed the controversy in current scholarship between idealist and realist interpretations of Epicurean gods. The realist reading takes Epicurus to have thought of gods as blessed, everlasting living creatures located outside the visible world; the idealist reading takes Epicurus to have meant that gods are constructs of the human mind, although our role in creating gods does not make them any less valuable as ethical models for us.²⁰ But both readings take the gods' imperishability to involve endless duration. On a realist reading, the gods must be a special exception to the destructibility of composites.²¹ On an idealist reading, we would have to say that the gods should be *regarded* or *conceived* as endlessly long-lived and immune to disintegration.²² This is not a special difficulty for the idealist reading, but on the same footing as the Epicurean claim that the gods are 'animals' or 'living creatures'. This too sounds incompatible with a view of Epicurean gods as thought-constructs, but exponents of the idealist reading can reply that the gods are merely to be *thought of* as animals.²³ Similarly, on an idealist reading, the gods are to be thought of as imperishable: when gods are described as 'blessed and imperishable animals', 'blessed', 'animal' and 'imperishable' all belong to the content of the concept. But here, too, there is evidence of variety: according to a difficult passage of Philodemus (*On Piety* col 12–13), Epicurus also considered the *nature* of the concept, not only its content – is it a concept that lasts forever? Epicurus tried to show that the concept itself is imperishable, because of its endless availability through time.²⁴ That

¹⁹ Warren himself argues persuasively for this point concerning the gods (2000: 250 n.52), but on different grounds: when Epicurean texts discuss the metaphysical make-up of gods, they are trying to explain how gods persist endlessly over time, without 'physical erosion', which suggests that the gods' imperishability is, or involves, everlastingness. See *PHerc.* 1055, perhaps written by Demetrius of Laconia, XXI and XXII, which distinguishes between (a) the gods' bodies and (b) the perceptible bodies that 'receive powerful blows', which will eventually be destroyed and so are not 'immortal' (ἀθάνατος). For text, Italian translation and commentary, consult Santoro 2000.

²⁰ 'Idealists take Epicurus' idea to have been, rather, that gods are our own graphic idealization of the life to which we aspire' (Sedley 2011: 29).

²¹ For a recent account, see Konstan 2011: 55–61. ²² See Long and Sedley 1987, vol. I: 146.

²³ Obbink 1996: 11 (especially n.5), against Mansfeld, whose defence of the realist reading emphasizes the point that the gods are said to be animals (1993: 178–80).

²⁴ On the longevity of the concept, see also Long and Sedley 1987, vol. I: 145–6.

Epicurus felt a need to show the endless longevity of the concept is further confirmation that the gods' imperishability is not merely a fearless attitude.

The difference between the gods' imperishability and their other attributes lies rather in our ability to achieve them. The gods' other attributes – blessedness, human shape, life – have either been received by us without any effort on our part (human shape and life) or can be achieved by us in full (blessedness). This is what makes the gods such suitable models for us. By contrast, we cannot become everlasting. I suggest that this explains why Epicurus introduces a further type of item that we can fully achieve, namely, the 'immortal goods'. As we saw above, it is not certain that the finale of the *Letter to Menoeceus* envisages a human being actually becoming imperishable or immortal. But in that passage Epicurus clearly envisages people achieving 'immortal goods' and godlikeness, and it is to the immortal goods that I now turn.

Vatican Saying 78 also speaks of 'immortal goods' and calls friendship such a good. But I will examine the *Letter to Menoeceus* first; it is safer to reach an interpretation of immortal goods in the letter independently of *Vatican Saying* 78, as much about the saying and its meaning is uncertain. 'Immortal goods' are mentioned at the letter's rhetorical climax, the uplifting description of godlike life in the peroration. It is natural to suppose that the letter has already indicated what these goods are, for Epicurus refers to the previous contents of the letter ('practise the above, and what is akin to it, day and night', 135). Surprisingly (given that this is a summary of Epicurean ethics), friendship has not been discussed in the letter, and so some items other than friendship must be the immortal goods that Epicurus has in mind.²⁵ Epicurus has just praised the person who lives both pleasantly and with all virtues, including the intellectual virtues of philosophical understanding and practical wisdom (*Letter to Menoeceus* 133–4). These comments on the person of intellectual and moral virtue look the most promising passage to examine. Such a person has pious beliefs about the gods (which in Epicureanism implies that he never fears the gods), is fearless towards death 'through everything', understands that a pleasant life is easily achieved in full, and does not fear pain, convinced, as Epicureans notoriously hold, that pain cannot be both long lasting and intense. The virtuous person also takes a lofty view of chance and destiny: chance, he thinks, does not make one happy or unhappy, but it provides merely opportunities for pleasure (as well as pain, for more foolish people).²⁶ Chance gives 'the starting points of great

²⁵ Frede 2016: 102 (see also 2016: 99) suggests that Epicurus did not in fact compose an 'extended' discussion of friendship.

²⁶ Unfortunately, the text is uncertain when Epicurus touches on destiny and the virtuous or wise attitude to it.

goods or evils'. So chance is not an object of fear or reverence for him; he knows that his happiness depends on what he does with the opportunities chance puts in his way.

These sound like negative points about the wise and virtuous person: he does not fear the gods, pain and death and does not venerate chance. But Epicurus has already explained that it is positively pleasurable, and therefore good, to *lack* 'disturbances' in the soul and pain in the body (131). So the various kinds of fearlessness in the virtuous person are in themselves goods. And they belong to him independently of chance – to lose them he would have to lose his wisdom, which (we are told elsewhere, Diogenes Laertius 10.117) is impossible. These goods are thus inalienable, and that, I suggest, is what 'immortal' means in this context: securely possessed for as long as the person is alive. The word 'immortal' is particularly appropriate for one of his goods: his fearlessness towards death, preserved 'through everything'. As Warren suggests, Epicurean immortality is indeed connected with the correct attitude towards death, but, strictly speaking, not fearing death is, in the wise person, an *immortal good*, not immortality or imperishability itself. (In someone else, the same attitude could fail to be 'immortal': imagine a lapsed Platonist who had faced death with confidence as long as he expected his soul to persist and enjoy wisdom after death, but then became terrified when he realized the true fate of his soul.) All the same, it is most unlikely that fearlessness towards death is the only 'immortal good' in a wise and virtuous person, for Epicurus uses the plural 'goods'. The wise person's fearlessness towards pain, the gods and chance are also goods, and, as they depend on understanding, are no less inalienable and do not 'die'.²⁷ 'Dying' can be used metaphorically in Greek poetry to describe the end of feelings and attitudes, such as pain.²⁸ The meaning is that a person used to have a painful existence but, when the pain 'dies', no longer suffers from it. By contrast, an immortal pain or pleasure would be a constant feature of the person's existence. Epicurus leans on this poetic use of 'death' and 'die' to make immortality characterize the goods enjoyed in a godlike life, if not the life or the godlike person.

The *Letter to Menoeceus* describes a process of gaining immortal goods and becoming godlike that is independent of friendship with others. Nothing in the description of the wise man suggests that his immortal

²⁷ I think this interpretation is preferable to supposing that 'immortal' connotes 'a persistent succession of goods' (Warren 2000: 243 n.36). The description of the wise and virtuous person emphasizes not the unending supply of new pleasures, but invulnerability to fortune and the permanence of his fearlessness towards death.

²⁸ See Pindar *Olympians* 2.19 (pain), Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 611 (trust).

goods include the memories he has of other people, the memories other people will have of him, or the benefits other people derive from him. Moreover, it is consistent with what is said here to suppose that the wise man's wisdom is itself one of his immortal goods. *Vatican Saying* 78 must therefore have been written from a quite different perspective. According to that text (at least if the usual emendation is accepted), friendship is an immortal good, but wisdom is a mortal good.²⁹ 'Immortal' here cannot mean 'inalienable' or 'inseparable' from the wise person, for, as we have seen, wisdom too is inalienable, and so wisdom should be included with friendship as 'immortal'. Probably the author of this saying has in mind the virtuous and wise man as a source of goods to himself and to other people. His wisdom (that is, his own cognitive state, not his wise sayings or teachings) dies with him, whereas his friendship will continue to be a source of benefits even after his death. This seems to fall significantly short of immortality, if the benefits are extended only for another generation. But it is possible that his friendship is extended over a longer period, to all those who wish to learn from his example or teachings, and so his friendship and the benefits it offers will be extended as long as memory or records of him survive.

We should thus avoid a unitary interpretation of Epicurean immortal goods. Sometimes their 'immortality' points to the fact that fortune and the prospect of death or pain cannot deprive the wise man of these goods within the span of his life, no more than anything could deprive gods of their goods. But elsewhere, in *Vatican Saying* 78, it marks the longevity of the wise person's benefits, which last even beyond his own death. We should also take note that, according to the *Vatican Saying*, at least one of the wise man's goods is mortal. That it should be *wisdom* is surprising, but the more general suggestion that the good life contains both mortal and immortal goods is quite compatible with the *Letter to Menoeceus*, which does not state that *all* the wise person's goods are immortal. Epicurus has reason to avoid that: the wise person may enjoy pleasures that are temporary and even brief, and, as all pleasures are good, even transitory pleasures are goods.

We should turn finally to another brief comment on mortal and immortal goods: according to the Epicurean Metrodorus (Seneca *Letter* 98.9) 'every good of mortals is mortal'. Seneca suggests (98.9–10) that Metrodorus was drawing a contrast between the fleeting, easily lost goods that most people pursue and the goods that are possessed securely.

²⁹ νοητόν is usually emended to θνητόν.

According to Seneca, the second group, securely possessed goods, has just one member, virtue or wisdom (he equates the two), which is our only ‘immortal’ possession. This probably reflects Seneca’s own moral perspective as a Stoic: in the same passage, he says that virtue (or wisdom) is the ‘true good’, and no Epicurean would accept the tacit suggestion that other so-called goods (such as pleasure or fearlessness) are *not* ‘true’ goods. But Seneca’s interpretation of ‘immortal’ as ‘securely possessed’ confirms the interpretation of the *Letter to Menoeceus* defended above, at least on the reasonable assumption that Metrodorus shared Epicurus’ view of what an ‘immortal’ good should be.

Metrodorus’ comment has, however, a striking implication: if a creature enjoys an immortal good, that creature cannot be mortal. (Seneca ignores or does not notice that implication, describing virtue as the immortal possession of mortal creatures.) So this passage takes us back to the question of whether wise people should be described as ‘imperishable’ or ‘immortal’ themselves. Early Epicurean writing shows some disagreement, or at least uncertainty, on this question. Epicurus in his letter does not explicitly describe the wise man as imperishable or immortal. He says instead that wise people live as gods among human beings – while still being ‘human beings’ themselves – and no longer resemble mortal creatures. But the quotation from Metrodorus suggests a more radical position: if every good of mortals is mortal, and if the wise man enjoys immortal goods, then the wise man cannot be mortal. Plutarch notes, in a highly polemical spirit, that Epicurus urged his pupil Colotes to go around as ‘imperishable’ and to think of Epicurus himself as ‘imperishable’ (*Against Colotes* III7c; *Epicurus makes a pleasant life impossible* 1091c). It is not certain that we should treat this as doctrine: the context is that Colotes has venerated Epicurus for his scientific teaching, and Epicurus graciously venerates Colotes in return (*Against Colotes* III7b-c). When Epicurus speaks of them both being ‘imperishable’, he may be using the language of Epicurean theology to make a similar point: if Colotes thinks of Epicurus as divine (for his scientific teaching), he should have exactly the same view of himself (perhaps for sharing the scientific understanding, and for seeing its enormous value).³⁰ But the passage of Metrodorus shows how one could construct an inference to make Epicurus and other possessors of immortal goods actually ‘immortal’ themselves, in much the same spirit as

³⁰ With the attribution of divinity compare Lucretius 5.1–13, where again scientific discoveries prompt the attribution, but where (typically of Lucretius) there is only one object of veneration: Epicurus. At the end of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, as in the passage in Plutarch, Epicurus does not keep divinity to himself: the addressee too will live as a god among human beings.

the common association in Greek writing (evident in the proverbial advice resisted by Aristotle) between being mortal and having mortal thoughts and possessions, or between being immortal and having immortal thoughts and possessions. All the same, the *Letter to Menoeceus* ends with a different and more guarded formulation, one more in keeping with Epicurus' suggestion earlier in the letter that people should learn to enjoy the 'mortality' of life (124). In descriptions of the gods, imperishability marks a quality that human beings cannot attain, and so it is understandable that in the letter Epicurus did not attribute immortality or imperishability even to the most godlike human beings, but instead used 'immortal' to mark their stable possession of certain good things.

3 Chrysippus on Immortality

To understand early Stoic writing about immortality, we must first consider what the Stoic Chrysippus says about death. Chrysippus' conception of death is stated and put to work when he considers what happens at the so-called conflagration. The fiery intelligence of the cosmos, or its 'soul', absorbs all matter into itself, ending the current structure of the cosmos and all life with it, apart from that of the designer god, Zeus, who survives to design the cosmos all over again and cause further iterations of world history. Should the conflagration be called the 'death' of the cosmos? The following is a quotation by Plutarch (*Stoic self-contradictions* 1052c) of Chrysippus' *On Providence* Book 1:

Death is the separation of the soul from the body, and the soul of the cosmos is not *separated* – rather, the soul grows continuously until it completely uses up the matter, absorbing the matter into itself. So the cosmos should not be said to 'die'.

The definition of death as the separation of soul from body goes back to Plato (*Phaedo* 64 c).³¹ Chrysippus uses that definition to deny that the conflagration, however destructive it may sound, is the 'death' of the cosmos.³² Death requires the soul to be separated from the body, and this is not what happens at the conflagration. Such a strict criterion for death rules out the extended use of 'death' that we saw above in the

³¹ Compare SVF 1.137, SVF 2.790. For discussion of the meaning of death across the *Phaedo* see Osborne 1995: 214, n.11 and Rowett (forthcoming).

³² See Philo *On the imperishability of the world* 9 for Stoic discussion of whether the world is 'perishable'. On my interpretation, this is a different question. For the cosmos' 'soul' and 'body', see Salles 2009a: 120–1.

discussion of Epicurus. If at some point during my life I stop experiencing pleasure, there is no separation of soul from body, and so it is simply incorrect to speak of the pleasure ‘dying’. The only items that can die are soul-body composites, and even they can be said to die only if the manner of their end involves the soul being separated from the body. If something lacks a soul or a body, or if it is destroyed in a process different from soul-body separation, it is not subject to death.

I suggest that Chrysippus took the following further step: if an item will be destroyed without dying, it should be called ‘perishable’ but not ‘mortal’. ‘Mortal’ should be used only of entities that truly ‘die’, such as human beings. Keimpe Algra has anticipated my interpretation in distinguishing between ‘mortal’ and ‘perishable’, partly in light of Chrysippus’ discussion of the cosmos’s death, although Algra does not apply the distinction throughout his study of Stoic theology.³³ But other scholarship on Stoic theology and cosmology has tended to equate ‘mortal’ with ‘perishable’ and ‘destructible’, and ‘immortal’ with ‘imperishable’ and ‘indestructible’. Ricardo Salles interprets Chrysippus’ argument, in the passage of Plutarch quoted above, that the cosmos does not ‘die’ as an argument that it is *indestructible* and persists through the conflagration. Tony Long’s discussion of Stoic theology moves from ‘immortality’ to ‘imperishability’ as if they were interchangeable.³⁴

Distinguishing between mortality and perishability enables us to resolve a puzzle about the status of Stoic gods. There is plenty of evidence that early Stoics attributed immortality to the gods – not only to Zeus, who alone persists from one cosmic iteration to the next, but also to the gods who do not outlast the world we know, such as the sun and the moon.³⁵ A god is ‘an *immortal* living being, rational, perfect or intelligent in happiness, not receptive of any evil, providential in relation to the cosmos and the items in the cosmos’ (Diogenes Laertius 7.147). Diogenes presents this as simply the Stoic definition of god as such, not as the view of an individual Stoic or a minority group, which would normally prompt him to give the name or names.³⁶ At the start of Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus*, the

³³ Algra 2004: 185–6. Contrast 2004: 182, where Algra appears to treat ‘immortal’ and ‘imperishable’ as equivalent – he takes Plutarch *On Common Conceptions* 1075e, which speaks of god as ‘immortal’, to show ‘imperishability’.

³⁴ Salles 2009a, especially 120 and 130. ‘Not a word here about immortality . . . I cannot think that the glaring omission of imperishability is inadvertent’ (Long 2006b: 121). See also Long 2006b: 123 (‘immortality or indestructibility’).

³⁵ For the divinity of the sun and moon, see Cicero *On the nature of the gods* 1.39, Plutarch *Stoic self-contradictions* 1052a.

³⁶ So Algra 2004: 180.

god is described as ‘most majestic of immortals’,³⁷ which implies that Zeus is not the only immortal. The other immortals are presumably the gods who constitute a particular part of the world we know and will not outlive it, such as the sun and moon; in what follows, I will call them ‘intra-cosmic gods’. If we can trust Plutarch’s wording (*Common Conceptions* 1075e), when Stoics criticized Epicurean theology they argued that, according to the preconception of god (see p. 71 above), god is not only ‘immortal and blessed’, but also affectionate, protective and beneficial towards humanity. Epicurus calls gods ‘imperishable’, but in the Stoic response this has been replaced with ‘immortal’, presumably because the Stoics themselves attribute immortality to the gods. I note finally that throughout Cicero’s account of Stoic theology, the second book of his *On the nature of the gods*, he treats it as uncontroversial that the gods are ‘immortal’ (*immortalis*).³⁸ Cicero does not make the gods’ immortality as prominent as we might expect, but this does not show, in itself, that Stoic gods are mortal. As Algra has argued, Balbus, the Stoic spokesman in Cicero’s dialogue, focusses on the ‘distinctive’ aspects of Stoic theology, such as the Stoics’ belief in providence, which puts them at odds with Epicureans.³⁹ On the other hand, Cicero’s Latin is weaker evidence for the wording of Greek Stoics, as he sometimes translates the Greek ‘imperishable’ (ἄφθαρτος) as ‘immortal’.⁴⁰

And yet Chrysippus regards the intra-cosmic gods as ‘perishable’. Plutarch uses this against the Stoics: with the single exception of the Stoics, he says, everyone who has a conception of the gods regards them as ‘imperishable and eternal’ (*Common Conceptions* 1074f, 1075a).

But in their theory Chrysippus and Cleanthes have virtually filled the sky, earth, air and sea with gods, and leave none of this vast number of gods imperishable (ἄφθαρτον) or everlasting, apart from Zeus alone, into whom they consume all the other gods. (1075a-b)

Plutarch emphasizes the number of perishable gods in order to minimize the importance of Zeus’ imperishability. It is reasonable to treat with caution the wording in such a polemical response to Stoicism, but elsewhere Plutarch provides quotations of Chrysippus’ *On the Gods* that

³⁷ I use the translation in Long and Sedley 1987, 54 I.

³⁸ See 2.2, 3, 10, 17, 45, 133, 163, 164. Sometimes we may suspect that Cicero is drawing on later Stoics, such as Panaetius (see e.g. Algra 2004: 179). Given that Panaetius denied the conflagration, he can consistently treat all the gods, not only Zeus, as everlasting. But evidently Cicero is not drawing exclusively on later Stoicism, for he frequently cites Chrysippus and other earlier Stoics.

³⁹ Algra 2004: 180, arguing against Long 2006b: 121. ⁴⁰ See n.18 above.

explicitly call Zeus ‘everlasting’ and the intra-cosmic gods ‘perishable’ (φθαρτοί, *Stoic self-contradictions* 1052a-b). According to a later description of Stoic cosmic recurrence, ‘the gods not subject to perishing’ know what will happen in subsequent iterations of world history; this suggests that other gods do perish.⁴¹

Both sides of this evidence can be understood if we suppose that Stoics distinguished between the imperishable (ἄφθαρτος) and the immortal (ἀθάνατος), and that, paradoxical though it may seem, immortality as Chrysippus conceives of it does not imply imperishability or everlastingness. One requirement for immortality, I suggest, is that the item will not undergo the soul-body separation called ‘death’; it does not follow from this that the item cannot be destroyed in some other manner. If deathlessness is the *only* requirement for immortality, it appears that the group of ‘immortal’ items will be expanded to the point of absurdity: sticks and stones do not have souls and so cannot die.⁴² For now, I postpone the question whether, in Chrysippus’ theory, immortality requires something in addition to deathlessness in such a way as to admit gods to the group but keep sticks and stones out. But already we see grounds for a metaphysical distinction between ‘mortal’ and ‘immortal’ items. Any mortal item will undergo death, and so must be a soul-body composite. By contrast, immortal items are not subject to death; they can, but need not, be soul-body composites. None of the following items undergoes death: an everlasting soul-body composite; a temporary soul-body composite destroyed in a process other than death; a separated soul destroyed in a process other than death. Although we can be confident that any mortal item has both a soul and a body, immortal items may be more heterogeneous.⁴³ The asymmetry is surprising, but it does not make Chrysippus’ theory incoherent.

Plutarch himself indicates, with heavy contempt, that Chrysippus drew a distinction between being mortal and being perishable (1075c-d):

Suppose they set against this that fine and ingenious suggestion that a human being is mortal, but a god is not mortal but perishable. Look at what results for them: they will say either (a) that the god is, at one and the same time, immortal and perishable – (b) or that the god is neither mortal nor immortal! Even if you maliciously invented other doctrines incompatible with the common conception, you could not outdo the absurdity of that.

⁴¹ Nemesius *On human nature* 38 = SVF 2.625.

⁴² These items all have ‘tenor’ (ἔξις), not ‘soul’. See Long and Sedley 1987, 47 P and Q.

⁴³ I have benefited here from discussion with Sami Yli-Karjanmaa.

Evidently Plutarch has in mind a passage in which Chrysippus called the gods ‘not mortal’ rather than ‘immortal’. The other evidence we saw above suggests that, of the two options Plutarch gives the Stoics, Chrysippus chose (a): the intra-cosmic gods are both immortal and perishable. This results from Chrysippus’ view of how gods perish and his strict criteria for ‘dying’: the gods’ souls are not parted from their bodies, but the entire god is absorbed, body and soul, at the conflagration.⁴⁴

A different objection to Chrysippus would go as follows: his position may be coherent, but it achieves coherence only by means of a very eccentric conception of the gods’ immortality. When gods are revered as ‘immortal’, it is because they last forever, not because they will be destroyed in one way rather than another. Chrysippus could simply have emphasized the literal meaning of ‘immortal’ (ἄθάνατος) in Greek, ‘deathless’, and pointed out that, according to his view of the world and its future, the intra-cosmic gods will not ‘die’. But this raises the problem I mentioned above: stones do not die, in this strict sense, and so is Chrysippus claiming them to be immortal as well? Here is a speculative outline of what Chrysippus could have said in response. The reason why it seems absurd to call sticks and stones ‘immortal’ is that, in Greek culture, immortality is normally attributed to objects of religious reverence – gods and divinized human beings. So let us consider what deserves reverence. This requires us to get into the mindset of Stoic theology and consider the connection between intra-cosmic gods and the world – that is, the world as it is currently structured, with earth, atmosphere, sky and celestial objects. Stoic piety is to revere the world, or some part of it, that is perfectly rational and conducive to human welfare. Unlike soulless objects, human beings (i.e. the human body-soul composite), human societies and human artefacts, these gods are a permanent feature of this world and will last as long as it does. If we believe, as Stoics do, that the world was rationally designed for our benefit, and that its parts contribute to fulfilling that rational design, it is rational for us to revere not only the overall designer, Zeus, but the divine parts of the world that contribute to our welfare, particularly as they do so rationally and knowingly. For as long as this

⁴⁴ Another way to retain the essential connection between divinity and immortality is to make Stoic theology less robustly polytheistic: if the intra-cosmic gods, such as the sun, are merely manifestations of Zeus, there is in fact only one god, and he is everlasting. See Algra 2004: 182–3. I prefer to see Stoic theology as poised somewhere between polytheism, pantheism and monotheism (as Algra himself suggests); a Stoic’s reverent attitude to the sun would consider Zeus’ design of the sun, the sun as a manifestation of Zeus but also what the sun itself does, as an individual part of the cosmos, to sustain the rest of the cosmos, especially life on earth. Chrysippus’ discussion of the sun’s immortality should not come at the expense of any one of these perspectives.

world-order endures, fostering human life and human moral development, the gods will play their part in that coordinated endeavour.⁴⁵ In other words, gods have an essential connection with the world that is not shared by soulless objects. If we are, as the objection assumes, to restrict immortality to objects worthy of reverence, let this essential connection to the world and its benefactions to humanity be added as a further requirement for immortality.

This brings me to human beings and our chances of attaining immortality. As soul-body composites, we are unavoidably mortal, no matter how much moral progress we make: even the people who have perfected their rationality, the wise and virtuous, remain soul-body composites that will be broken apart at death. After death, our souls are ‘perishable’, for none of them, however virtuous, will outlast the end of the world (Diogenes Laertius 7.156, SVF 2.809).⁴⁶ According to Chrysippus, the souls of virtuous or wise people persist until the conflagration (Diogenes Laertius 7.157, Eusebius *Preparation for the gospel* 15.20.6). In this respect, they resemble the perishable gods: like these gods, they endure until they come to an end in a process distinct from death, namely being absorbed into the supreme god.

[The Stoics] hold that the souls of courageous men wander in the sky like stars, and are immortal (*immortales*) in this sense, that they do not *die* but are *destroyed*, whereas according to Plato souls are not even destroyed.⁴⁷

This passage suggests that such souls were, on account of literal deathlessness, called ‘immortal’. We can add to it Cicero’s testimony that Chrysippus described certain people as becoming immortal: when Velleius, the spokesman for Epicureanism, lists the items regarded as gods by Chrysippus, he includes ‘the human beings who have obtained immortality’ (*homines eos qui immortalitatem essent consecuti*, *On the nature of the gods* 1.39). As ever, we cannot be sure that ‘immortality’ in Cicero’s Latin translates the corresponding word in Greek rather than ‘imperishability’. Two points constrain our interpretation: (i) the

⁴⁵ This is admittedly not true of the months or years that, according to Cicero (*On the nature of the gods* 1.36), Zeno regarded as gods. It may be significant that this view is associated with Zeno, not Chrysippus.

⁴⁶ According to St Augustine, Zeno stated that the soul is ‘mortal’ (*mortalem*, *Against the Academics* 3.38 = SVF 1.146). Here again we cannot be confident that ‘mortal’ in Latin accurately reflects the Greek original. Augustine is emphasizing the contrast between the teaching of the Academy and the falsehoods, as he sees them, introduced by Zeno. He has just said that Plato learned from Pythagoras (and ultimately from Pherecydes) that the soul is ‘immortal’ (*immortalem*, 3.37), and it suits his purpose here to make Zeno’s doctrine directly contradict this.

⁴⁷ Scholia on Lucan 9.6, Usener 1869: 290 = SVF 2.817.

human soul-body composite cannot become immortal, as it will die; (2) neither the separated soul nor the soul-body composite can become *imperishable*, as both will eventually be destroyed. The only plausible option remaining is that Chrysippus had in mind the separated souls of virtuous people, and suggested that they become not imperishable but immortal, and gain the essential connection to the world, and its timescale, that the intra-cosmic gods have.⁴⁸ Treating the immortalized items as souls matches some of our other evidence for divinized or revered human beings in Stoicism: heroes are the ‘souls’ of virtuous people, and *daimones* or lesser deities are also souls (Diogenes Laertius 7.151, Sextus Empiricus *Against the Physicists* 1.74, SVF 2.1101).

As heroes or *daimones*, these souls can be thought to benefit living human beings. According to Diogenes Laertius, *daimones* ‘watch over human affairs’. The Stoic Posidonius is said to have described ‘immortal souls’ (*immortalium animorum*) – the wording is Cicero’s, and the now familiar warning about Latin translation applies – causing divination when people dream (Cicero *On Divination* 1.64).⁴⁹ The Latin word ‘immortal’ has caused puzzlement when taken together with the evidence that Posidonius believed that the world as we know it will end in the conflagration.⁵⁰ But there is no difficulty: these souls have achieved the same status as their fellow immortals, intra-cosmic gods. As long as this world-order exists, they will persist within it as contributors to human welfare; when it ceases, their fate will not be to die, in the strict sense of that word.⁵¹ Immortality thus never characterizes a human life, however virtuous. Immortality is attained by certain souls after death because of the moral perfection gained by the human being during life. As in Empedocles, becoming immortal means to share the gods’ longevity and to be ended in the same manner, and at the same time, as the gods.

In the [previous section](#), we saw Epicurus claiming that the virtuous person receives ‘immortal goods’, if not immortality itself, during life. This compromise, if that is the right term for it, should have little appeal for Chrysippus. It relies on a metaphorical use of ‘die’ that is at odds with his

⁴⁸ So Cicero cannot reflect Chrysippus’ view accurately when he later says that divinized human beings are ‘everlasting’ (*aeterni*, 2.62). Perhaps he is making a faulty inference from the claim that they are ‘immortal’.

⁴⁹ Kidd 1988: 430–2 and Wardle 2006: 268–9 connect this passage to the Stoic theory of *daimones*.

⁵⁰ Kidd 1988: 431–2 argues that there cannot be a reference to immortality ‘in any strict sense’.

⁵¹ We might notice in this connection that, according to Epiphanius, Zeno held the mind or intellect to be ‘immortal’ (ἀθάνατος), even though the ‘soul’ is ‘not wholly imperishable’ (*On the Faith* 9.40 SVF 1.146). (Contrast Augustine in n.46 above.) See also Hippolytus *Refutation* 1.21.3 = SVF 2.807: ‘[the Stoics] say that the soul is immortal’.

insistence on more rigorous, or at least literal, criteria for death in his cosmology and theology. Moreover, in Stoicism genuine goodness is much rarer than it is in Epicureanism. For Epicureans, every pleasure is good, and so even people who reason poorly receive ‘goods’; it thus becomes important to distinguish *their* goods from those enjoyed by virtuous people.⁵² According to Stoicism, however, as long as people make poorly reasoned choices their lives does not contain goodness at all: anything genuinely good is either virtue, a virtuous act or somehow dependent on virtue. Until the rare achievement of becoming virtuous, goodness is altogether absent, not merely outweighed. So Stoics do not need to supplement ‘good’ with a further adjective, such as ‘immortal’, that marks the good as possessed uniquely by virtuous people. Anyone who really possesses ‘goods’ has become as godlike as any human being can become.

4 Summary

This chapter concludes the section on immortality with three discussions of immortality in contexts in which people and their souls are not taken to be everlasting. Like Plato before him, Aristotle responds to supposedly pious advice to lower human ambitions, and the passage on immortalization in the *Nicomachean Ethics* should be understood in that particular context. Normally in his ethical writing Aristotle prefers to contrast the human and the divine, not the mortal and the immortal, and the reason is that human ethical action gets its peculiar character from very diverse human qualities and, more specifically, kinds of vulnerability, of which mortality is only one. In this passage, it is the wording of traditional maxims, not his own psychological doctrine, that prompts Aristotle to speak of immortality.

In Epicureanism people are encouraged to emulate the gods, and the language of immortality is yet again called into service to describe it. The immortal goods of the godlike human being are possessed inalienably. It is less certain whether such a person should be called ‘imperishable’, as the imperishable gods have an everlastingness that we cannot attain. And yet Epicureans occasionally use imperishability of the godlike person, although Epicurus’ own summary of his ethics does not. The variety of their usage, shown even without detailed consideration of later Epicureans such as Lucretius and Philodemus, is a tiny illustration of the diversity of

⁵² See [chapter 5, section 2](#).

Epicurean writing, which we will see more fully when we consider Epicurean discussions of death.

In Stoicism the distinction between ‘immortal’ and ‘imperishable’ explains both how gods can be immortal, even though they are parts of a temporary world-order, and how virtuous souls attain immortality, despite their finite duration. Both souls and these gods will perish, but not through death. All gods are in that sense immortal, despite the fate of the world they inhabit, and the most admirable souls can be described as resembling the gods in respect of immortality. In Stoicism, at least, there is no equivocation in calling both gods and separated virtuous souls ‘immortal’.

As much of the emphasis has been on the contrasts, I will close on a note of consensus. Despite the rough treatment Chrysippus’ distinction received in the hands of the Platonist Plutarch, all the philosophers considered in this chapter should be seen as Plato’s allies in resisting advice to let mortality shrink human ambition, ethical or (in Aristotle’s case) intellectual and scientific.

PART II

Death

Death, Doubts and Scepticism

Epicurean writing about death has attracted particular interest in contemporary philosophy. The Epicureans are in no doubt that death will end the soul and its awareness of events, and they aim to draw comfort from certainty that death will be terminal in that sense. But there are other ancient traditions which do not lay to rest doubts about the outcome of death, but seek nonetheless to provide comfort by reasoning about the correct attitude to death.¹ Perhaps the most famous example is Socrates' comments on death near the end of Plato's *Apology*. Socrates reconciles himself to his imminent death while still unsure whether death will bring a total loss of awareness or a change of place.

Socrates' personal example suggests that people do not need to be certain about the outcome of death if they are to face it without fear. This will be important in philosophical traditions that see Socrates as a moral paradigm, such as the sceptical Academy and Stoicism. It is only to be expected that a sceptic will deny knowing for sure whether or not death brings annihilation. But a Stoic writer may adopt the same stance: although Stoics believe that humans have the potential to attain knowledge, knowledge in the strict sense is found only in the perfected human being, often called the 'sage' in modern scholarship, and the Stoic philosophers whose writing has survived most fully, such as the Roman Stoics Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, do not claim to be 'sages'. So an agnostic attitude is available to them too, as we will see in chapter 6. From a purely practical or consolatory point of view, the thought that fearlessness need not be underpinned by certainty marginalizes Epicurean endeavours to prove decisively that the soul will be destroyed: despite what the Epicureans tell their readers and pupils, removing fear and distress about death does not require knowing for sure whether death is the end of the human being and of his or her soul. But an

¹ Contrast again Williams 1973: 83, which was quoted in chapter 2, n.13: 'death is said by some not to be an evil because it is not the end, and by others, because it is.'

appropriation of Epicurean thought also becomes possible: if annihilation is one possible outcome of death, and Epicureans show annihilation not to be an evil, then Epicurean arguments can be used in the service of a sceptical agenda. This helps explain both the comparatively low profile of Epicurus in the fullest sceptical treatment of death to have survived from antiquity – the first book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, where Epicurus and his followers are named only twice (1.77, 1.82)² – and Cicero's use of arguments reminiscent of Epicureanism.

This chapter will begin with Socrates in Plato's *Apology* and end with the Roman sceptic Cicero, who represents himself as following a Socratic model and indeed quotes extensively from the *Apology* (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.97–99, *Apology* 40c–41d).³ The second text will be Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates argues at length for the immortality of the soul. That dialogue might seem to have no place in an exploration of doubts and uncertainty about death: surely, we might say, it exemplifies the doctrinal treatment of death from which sceptics would distance themselves. But Plato's reflections on the soul, particularly in respect of its 'divine' character, have not taken him simply towards greater certainty: they have thrown into question some long-standing assumptions in Greek literature about the afterlife. One of Socrates' interlocutors, Simmias, remains in doubt at the end of the exchange, and, as we will see, his comments on philosophical procedure made the *Phaedo* suitable for appropriation by Cicero in his sceptical treatment of death.

1 Socrates on Death in Plato's *Apology*

In the *Apology*, Plato imagines how Socrates would respond to a variety of charges. Of course, they include the judicial charges of which the historical Socrates was convicted, represented here as corrupting the young, failing to recognize the gods worshipped by the city and introducing new gods in their place (24b). But after Socrates has answered these charges, he considers a different kind of challenge, a charge of irrational or foolish behaviour (28b): 'are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have engaged in the sort of activity that may now cause you to die?' The charge has a looser connection to the judicial proceedings, as it suggests not that he is guilty of the formal charges, but that he ought to regret having acted in such a way as

² There is in addition a reference to Epicurean veneration of Epicurus at 1.48.

³ See also the echo of *Apology* 40c–e in *Tusculan Disputations* 1.117.

to provoke a prosecution where the death sentence is a real possibility. This is the context for the first discussion of death in his speech.

Socrates has explained how he came to devote his life to examining other people and uncovering their ignorance. Now Plato is giving Socrates an opportunity to explain why this was not a mistaken or poorly reasoned choice. From its outcomes – first the trial, and then, as Plato's readers already know, Socrates' execution – it looks very much like a bad decision. The issue is thus whether Socrates had satisfactory grounds to carry on examining other people even at the cost of his own life. For this purpose, it would not be enough to show that Socrates' decisions or actions were *legal*, and the judicial charges against him withdraw, for the moment, out of sight. Socrates' response is uncompromising. When acting, he says, you should not look to the risk of death, or the chances of staying alive. Instead, you should look only to the justice or injustice of the action, and at whether it is characteristic of a 'good or bad man' (28b-c). That last point suggests that he does not have in mind justice and injustice exclusively, for the Greek word for 'bad' suggests a wider range of vices than injustice, such as cowardice, and similarly 'good' suggests virtues other than justice. Soon afterwards we see one reason why Plato chooses not to word Socrates' commitment purely in terms of justice: he describes how in the *Iliad* Achilles was resolved to avenge Patroclus despite knowing that doing so will make his own death come sooner (28c-d; *Iliad* 18.88–104). As Plato is well aware, although Achilles' decision to kill Hector could be presented as a matter of justice – Socrates describes Achilles resolving to 'punish the wrongdoer' (28d) – in Homer's poem, Achilles is motivated more by thoughts of what he would be if he failed to avenge Patroclus: merely 'a burden on the earth' (18.104). Socrates' comment on good and bad people allows for this sort of consideration.

But there is real philosophical significance in making thoughts about the good and bad person, not only justice and injustice, a reason for disregarding death: Socrates' commitment becomes even more demanding. There are cases where justice alone does not require one to risk death, but doing so would be characteristic of some other virtue, such as courage. For example, we would normally describe a journalist's decision to enter a war zone as courageous, not just. Even here, it seems, the risk of death should be disregarded. It looks as if Socrates fully intends his commitment to have this more general application, and not to be confined to cases of justice and injustice: 'wherever someone stations himself, thinking it to be best, or is stationed by his commander, there, in my view, he must stay and run the risk, giving no consideration to death or anything else rather than

what is shameful' (28d). (Notice that he says 'best', not 'most just', and 'shameful', not 'unjust'.) Socrates then gives personal examples from his own life where it was right for him to put his life at risk: being stationed as a soldier to fight, and (the case at issue) being stationed by a god to undertake philosophy and examine himself and other people (28d-e). Given his previous remarks, these examples need not illustrate commitment to justice; the relevant virtues may be courage and piety respectively.⁴

It is remarkable that Socrates has made strong claims about death's place, or rather its insignificance, in correct moral thinking without any discussion of whether death is the end of us. Now at last he comes to death itself:

Fearing death, men of the jury, is nothing other than thinking oneself wise when one is not. For it is to think one knows what one does not know. Nobody knows even whether death it is in fact the greatest of all goods for a human being, but people fear it as if they know for sure that it is the greatest of evils. How could this fail to be the disgraceful ignorance of supposing one knows what one does not know? (29a-b)

Socrates has already narrated how, puzzled at the Delphic oracle's pronouncement that nobody was wiser than him, he examined other people who seemed to be wiser and who thus seemed to prove the oracle wrong. He found that they believed themselves to have knowledge or wisdom that in fact they lacked (21a-22e). In the quoted passage, he suggests that the fear of death is an example of this very delusion. During his reflections on the Delphic oracle, Socrates realized that his superiority lay in his awareness of his own lack of knowledge or wisdom (21b, 23b),⁵ and his own attitude to death is an instance of this awareness of the lack of knowledge: he is wiser than other people inasmuch as he recognizes his own ignorance about death. But he does know that it is against his interests, and shameful, to disobey a superior, divine or human, and to commit injustice (29b).⁶ So when faced with a known evil, such as disobeying a god, he will not be deterred by the risk of death, as he does not know whether death is an evil.

It seems wrong to suggest that fearful people must believe themselves to have *knowledge* about the feared object: surely, we might say, people can fear something and yet recognize their ignorance about it, such as when they fear a surgical procedure that may have unpleasant side effects. The fearful patients may be fully aware that they do not yet know how the operation will turn out. Perhaps Socrates has in mind the particular way in

⁴ Contrast the exclusive focus on justice in Brickhouse and Smith 2004: 121–3. ⁵ See Fine 2008.

⁶ For this claim to knowledge, see Leshner 1987: 280.

which people fear death: people 'fear it as if they know for sure that it is the greatest of evils'. In this particular case, he may mean, people's actions and attitudes suggest a kind of certainty that other kinds of fear do not suggest.⁷ But that too is open to challenge: some people's fear of death may resemble the fear of surgery where the patient is all too aware of the unknowns. Plato himself provides an example of that: in the *Phaedo*, Cebes expresses anxiety about death where there is uncertainty about the soul's survival, not certainty that it will be destroyed (69e-70b).

How pessimistic is Socrates in the *Apology* about the chances of attaining knowledge, during life, about death? The factual claim that 'nobody knows' whether or not death is the greatest good does not imply that it is impossible for people to acquire the knowledge. But it would be strange to take his attitude to death if he thought it possible to find out whether death is good or bad. On facing a decision between an impious but otherwise safe action and an action that honours a divine command but endangers one's life, it would be rational to establish whether death is an evil, or a greater evil than impiety. The fact that Socrates does not envisage such an inquiry suggests that people are simply stuck with ignorance about death, and must reason and act accordingly, even though his words do not strictly imply that. Similarly, the discussion of human ignorance about death is another occasion to mention the possibility of finding out whether death is evil, and Socrates' silence again suggests that he has no confidence of such an inquiry succeeding. We might diminish his scepticism by seizing on his claim, in the passage quoted above, that nobody knows whether death is the 'greatest' good (29a); perhaps he thinks that people might discover whether death is good rather than evil, but not whether death is a good surpassing all other goods. But he then goes on to say that he does not know whether death is 'good' (29b; compare 37b), which suggests that in 29a the reference to the 'greatest' good is not intended to limit his agnosticism; in that earlier passage, he is criticizing people for imagining themselves to know that it is the greatest of evils, and that criticism is made rhetorically more effective by mentioning the possibility that, on the contrary, death may be the greatest of goods.

We should be surprised, then, when Socrates returns to death at the end of the *Apology* and suggests that, at least for him, dying now is 'probably' good (40b-c), or 'clearly' better than a longer life (41d). It is not that he contradicts his earlier statements, for he does not claim in the later passage to *know* that death is good.⁸ But the earlier section envisaged no prospect,

⁷ So McPherran 1996: 254.

⁸ So Rudebusch 1999: 72; Brickhouse and Smith 1989a: 162 and 2004: 179.

for a living human being, of finding out whether death is good or bad, whereas at the end of the speech Socrates says that death is, for him, the better outcome. This suggests that between the two passages he has somehow gained special insight into his death, and so the context of the second passage is important. Greek literature sometimes credits people close to death with special powers of prophecy and clairvoyance; for example, in the *Iliad* the dying Patroclus warns Hector that Achilles will avenge his death (16.844–54). That Homeric passage nicely illustrates the Greek belief that what we often call ‘prophecy’ relates to the present and even the past as well as to the future: as Patroclus dies he becomes aware that Zeus has been enabling Hector’s success and that Apollo contributed to his own death, even though at the time he did not recognize the god (16.789–90, 849).⁹ Plato is quite capable of exploiting this belief in prophecy before death: in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is even closer to death, he claims to have the same prophetic power that swans have (85b). Given this cultural association between imminent death and special insight, in the *Apology* the moment when Socrates is condemned to death (38b) marks an important transition: it is now inevitable that Socrates will shortly die, and so Plato’s readers should not assume that the claims he makes from this point are standardly available to human reasoning. And he does indeed make a prophecy: ‘I am now at the point where people are most given to prophecies: the point when they are about to die’ (39c). What follows immediately is a grim prophecy to the jurors who found him guilty: there will be others who hold them to account with more anger than Socrates himself had for them (39c–d). But then he turns to the jurors who voted for him to be acquitted, and tells them that the failure of his divine sign to intervene must be highly significant: ‘probably what has happened is good for me, and there is no way we are correct who suppose that being dead is bad’ (40b–c). Otherwise, his divine sign would have made him behave differently and so protected him from death.¹⁰

Plato has signalled as clearly as he could that what follows – a favourable evaluation of death – was not available to Socrates either during his previous life or when defending himself during the trial. Now that Socrates is about to die, he suggests that death is one of two things: the total loss of awareness, or a change of location for the soul. The first outcome is also described as annihilation, but with a small indication that this may not be quite accurate: ‘being nothing, *as it were*, and not

⁹ Compare Xenophon *Apology* 30. For further examples, see Most 1993: 108.

¹⁰ For the divine sign, see Brickhouse and Smith 2004: 139–48; Long 2006a.

having any awareness of anything' (40c).¹¹ Socrates thus allows that something may survive of us, but suggests that what matters is that, on this view of death, there will be no awareness either for it or for us. He compares such a condition to sleep, but again is careful not to identify it as sleep: 'a sleep, as it were, when the sleeper sees nothing, not even in a dream' (40c-d). This sounds like an anticipation of Epicureanism, but Socrates' favourable verdict on sleep-like oblivion relies on a comparison between life and death that no Epicurean would accept. No matter who we are, the days and nights of our lives preferable to – in his words, 'better and more pleasant than' (40d) – total non-awareness are vastly outnumbered by the days and nights that are not. So death is a gain, not a loss. Socrates says that this is true even of the King of Persia, but it must of course apply to philosophers too, given that he is trying to show how his own death is good. We need not take Socrates to mean that a dreamless sleep, or the post-mortem non-awareness with which it is compared, is positively pleasant.¹² He is making a comparison between non-awareness and life, and he needs to assume only that most of life is sufficiently unpleasant, or bad in some other way, to prevent it from being 'better and more pleasant' than a state of complete non-awareness.¹³ But that assumption is controversial enough. It is deeply unattractive to Epicureanism, which shows how easily pleasure can be attained, and distress minimized or completely avoided, during life. So we should avoid calling this the 'Epicurean' possibility, despite the superficial similarities.

In Plato's text, Socrates indicates rather subtly – 'as it were' – that the total loss of awareness at death is not exactly the same thing as a dreamless sleep. Later literature would try to make this relationship clearer. When Cicero translates this section of the *Apology* into Latin, he makes Socrates say that death is 'similar' to a dreamless sleep (*Tusculans* 1.97). Plutarch's *Consolation to Apollonius* goes further:¹⁴ it suggests that Socrates distinguished between three outcomes, not two. Death resembles a very deep

¹¹ This aspect of Socrates' wording is rightly noted by Benitez 2015: 211. Benitez also argues (2015: 208–10) that 'being nothing' means not annihilation but 'being good for nothing'. But I find it easiest to explain Socrates' use of 'as it were' if it marks the risk of exaggeration in a stronger claim, such as that the dead are annihilated.

¹² Contrast Rudebusch 1999: 69–72, which defends a conception of pleasure according to which dreamless sleep is pleasant.

¹³ If most days of our life involve at least some pleasure, as seems plausible, then Socrates needs also to assume that a period with some pleasure, but a preponderance of pain or distress, is not more pleasant than a period of complete non-awareness. In other words, for the purpose of the comparison pain and distress somehow negate pleasure.

¹⁴ For discussion of Plutarch's text, see also chapter 6, section 4.

sleep, or a long journey, or the destruction of soul and body (107d). ('Resemble' is not quite right for the third option, where death really is destruction, as Plutarch says at 109e.) Obviously, Plutarch or an intermediary is embarrassed by the fact that Plato's Socrates treats as a single possible outcome 'being nothing, as it were' and 'sleep, as it were' (40c-d), and so in Plutarch sleep and annihilation have been separated as distinct outcomes, which brings the total to three.

Let us return to Plato's text. All that Socrates has with which to flesh out the second outcome, translocation, is 'what is said about it' (40c, e). Those reports suggest that his soul will join other souls, including the souls of famously intelligent men, such as Odysseus and Sisyphus, and other famous victims of unjust judgements, such as Ajax and Palamedes (41a-c). Given that what interests Socrates is engaging with their intellects and memories (he plans to compare his experiences with those of other victims and to examine the most intelligent heroes), he treats this prospect as no less than a meeting with Odysseus, Sisyphus and so on themselves: he says that 'all the dead people (masculine)' will be there (40e), not merely that their souls will be there (the Greek word for 'soul' is feminine).¹⁵ The passage thus anticipates the more famous claim in the *Phaedo* that when Socrates dies he himself, unlike his corpse, will depart (115d); there too, the point about personal identity is underpinned by a brief reference to conversations (115c). If his friends care about the Socrates who has been reasoning about what to say in the conversation, then *that* item – his soul or intellect – will not stay behind to be buried. By the same token, if Socrates is interested in the Sisyphus famously said to rival the gods for cleverness, then he too will be available for Socrates to question, at least if the reports of the afterlife are true.

On the face of it, this favourable evaluation of the two outcomes seems to be available to those who lack Socrates' divine sign. Evidently, Plato can communicate it to his readers, and in Plato's fiction Socrates can communicate it to his sympathetic jurors. But the non-intervention of the divine sign shows only that Socrates' own death is good for him, not that each person's death will be good for him or her.¹⁶ Moreover, in the absence of a divine sign it is not certain what authority 'what is said' about Hades can carry. Even Socrates does not fully commit himself to the truth of those stories: 'the people there are happier in other ways than people here, and

¹⁵ The inclusion of the devious fraudster Sisyphus is surprising, but Socrates does not picture himself meekly learning from everyone he meets. He plans to 'examine' them and to find out which of them 'thinks he is wise but is not'.

¹⁶ So Brickhouse and Smith 1989a: 156.

for the rest of time they are immortal, at least if what is said is true' (41c).¹⁷ And the verdict that death is good has held been back until after the explanation of the decisions made by Socrates during his life. So from an ethical point of view we should emphasize the earlier passage, agnostic as it is about the goodness of death, not the more famous passage at the end of the speech, where death is said to be either the loss of awareness or a change of location. Socrates has spent his life making decisions with no view on whether death is good and bad, and at no point has he chosen to risk death in the belief, tentative or firm, that death will be advantageous to him. This extends even to his conduct during the trial: he does not come to see that death is good until he has been not only found guilty but also condemned to death. In this regard, Xenophon offers a quite different account of the trial, according to which Socrates had realized *before* the trial that death was preferable to a longer life (*Apology* I, 5, 9–10, 22). Xenophon thus shields his Socrates from any hint of failure: the death sentence was exactly the outcome that Socrates desired. Plato, by contrast, carefully avoids suggesting that Socrates was courting death during the trial, even though it then looks as if Socrates tried sincerely to get himself acquitted and failed.¹⁸ In Plato, the positive evaluation of death comes in the post-ethical part of the speech: Socrates thinks of his death as good only after he has committed himself to philosophy, even at the risk of death, and when it is too late to consider how best to speak and act during the trial.

It is thus appropriate that the note on which the *Apology* ends is one of agnosticism: 'the time has come to depart, for me by dying, for you to live – which of us goes to the better outcome is unclear to all except god' (42a).¹⁹ Cicero thought that Socrates could not really mean this: he has just shown which is better, and he *does* know what he says only god knows (*Tusculans* I.99). But from Plato's perspective an advantage of this agnosticism is to signal that in their lives people do not have available to them the evaluation of death prompted in Socrates by the divine sign. Like Socrates, if they undertake a moral action that puts their lives at risk, the motivating belief should be that cowardice, injustice and impiety are bad, not that death is good.

¹⁷ Compare Brickhouse and Smith 1989a: 157.

¹⁸ See Brickhouse and Smith 2004: 104–5, 158. This is related to the fact that in Plato the relationship between the philosopher and the city is more problematic than it is in Xenophon: if Socrates tried sincerely to defend himself, and failed, something must block successful communication by philosophers to the wider community. The image of the Cave in *Republic* 7 is one account of what that might be.

¹⁹ For a reading of the *Apology* as agnostic about the soul's survival, see also McPherran 1996: 252–71.

2 Human Weakness and the Soul in Plato's *Phaedo*

In the *Phaedo*, there is a new claim about the human soul: it resembles the divine. As we saw in [chapter 2, section 1](#), the divine items to which Socrates compares the soul include both the Forms and the gods. The 'natural' relationship between the soul and the body has the soul in the position of ruler or master, and in this respect the soul resembles the divine (80a) – by which Socrates probably means that it resembles the gods, the masters or owners of human beings (62b–63c).²⁰ When a soul is able to engage in inquiry without interference from the body, it considers the unchanging Forms, and during those periods it comes to share the Forms' stability (79d). In respect of stability the soul, when undisturbed by the body, resembles the Forms, and its intrinsic orientation towards the Forms shows a kinship or affinity between it and them (79d–e). These points are made as part of the Affinity Argument for the soul's immortality. Socrates' interlocutor Simmias will challenge the inference in this argument from divinity to immortality (85e–86d), but the claim that the soul bears similarities with the divine is not itself disputed. On the contrary, Simmias grants that the soul may be 'very divine' (86c), but objects that this does not entail its lasting forever. In making that concession, Simmias rather distorts Socrates' position, which is that the soul *resembles* the divine, not that it is divine.

This view of the soul introduces uncertainty to an area where the *Apology*, at least at the end, was confident. At the end of the *Apology*, Socrates suggested that if death is a change of location for the soul rather than the loss of awareness, and if 'what is said' about Hades is true, he will be united with other dead human beings and somehow commune with them. The union envisaged in the *Apology* does not merely involve Socrates' soul having the same fate or destination as other souls; he is supposed to direct his attention to other souls, questioning them and comparing his experiences with theirs. This is a venerable expectation about the afterlife: in Homer's *Odyssey* the souls in Hades talk not only to the living Odysseus, during his visit to Hades, but also to one another (24.19–204). But in the *Phaedo* it becomes uncertain. A soul has the intrinsic tendency to study, or direct its attention to, what really is divine, and souls themselves are merely 'similar' to the divine (80a, 81a). So the soul's intrinsic orientation is towards the Forms and the gods, not towards other people or their souls. It seems reasonable to suppose that

²⁰ So Bostock 1999: 422–3.

a soul will become more engrossed in contemplation of the divine to the degree that it is detached from the body.²¹ If that is right, a soul that is fully detached from the body at death will direct its attention towards the divine exclusively. But full detachment is, according to Socrates, the optimal outcome at death, and will be the fate for the soul of a philosopher. So it is the philosopher's soul that seems least likely to be united with other souls after death in the way the *Apology* had described, where union involved interaction between souls, not merely sameness of outcome.²²

It is significant then that Socrates assures his friends that he will join the gods (81a), but does not say that he and his friends will be reunited when they are all dead. And he says explicitly that he is uncertain whether he will encounter other people after death (63c):

I assure you that I am hoping to join the company of good men. I wouldn't absolutely insist on this,²³ but as for entering the company of gods who are entirely good masters, be sure that if there is anything of this sort that I would insist on, it is on that.

In the myth at the end of the dialogue, Socrates describes various communities: the aether-breathers on the surface of the earth (111a-c), and the souls of ordinary people around the Acherusian lake (113a-b), who are joined by other souls released from punishment (114a-b). But philosophers will have a different fate, about which he says very little: 'those who purified themselves sufficiently with philosophy live thereafter entirely without bodies, and enter dwellings fairer still than these, although explaining these dwellings is not easy, nor is there sufficient time in the present circumstances' (114c). The notion of a community of blessed souls may have to be jettisoned, at least concerning philosophers. When Socrates subsequently describes what awaits him, the Greek wording strongly suggests that he is about to say the 'islands of the blessed', but he replaces

²¹ It may seem neater to stick with Forms and remove gods from the picture. But Plato's most vivid representation of the discarnate soul, the palinode of the *Phaedrus*, represents souls as striving both to follow gods and to view the Forms (246d-248e).

²² In the *Phaedrus*, discarnate souls interact with one another, but only by striving to get a better view of Forms than other souls, or by colliding (248a-b). Discarnate souls are not said to care for or assist one another; such help as souls receive comes from imitating a god. Even the lover and beloved are not said to assist each other after death; their reward is rather to become more capable of viewing Forms, or, in the imagery of the speech, for both of them to gain 'wings' (see 256b-d).

²³ The Greek wording is ambiguous between 'I would not altogether insist' and 'I would not insist at all'. See LSJ s.v. πᾶν. Later, Socrates suggests it to be likely that after death philosophers will be with pure people (67a), but the Greek is ambiguous here as well: he may mean that philosophers will be with pure things (neuter), i.e. the Forms.

'islands' with 'happy states' (115d).²⁴ 'Island' would suggest a community and embodied existence, but both may be inappropriate: after death his soul may become unaware of, or indifferent to, other rewarded souls, even those of his friends and family.

Plato's reflections on the soul have not simply reinforced confidence in one of the two outcomes presented in the *Apology*, namely, translocation, personal survival and a community of the dead. It is now uncertain whether what survives Socrates' death will retain the passion for cross-examination and education shown during his life. It is all very well for Socrates to tell Crito that he himself will survive death and depart, and so identify himself with his soul (115c-d), but if Crito values Socrates' affection for his friends, not merely his intellect, then that aspect of Socrates may be about to perish. The affinity between the soul and the divine thus raises the real possibility that traditional views of Hades should be radically reconceived, and that what survives death may, if the person is a philosopher, be less than most people would wish for. By withholding in the myth even a speculative account of the philosopher's fate, Plato ends his dialogue without resolving these questions, but the parts of the dialogue outlined above point firmly towards a narrowing of interests. Socrates for his part is undaunted by that prospect and at the end of the dialogue drinks the poison with utter composure. But the narrator Phaedo may be right to present Socrates' death as the loss of a friend (117c-d, 118a) – that is, as the *permanent* loss of his friend.²⁵

I turn now to the doubts of Socrates' two main interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes.²⁶ Here too the nature of the soul will prove important, particularly in the evaluation of Simmias. The two interlocutors provide contrasting models of doubt. Cebes is more outspoken and decisive: Socrates says of him, with approval, that he is always examining arguments and does not automatically believe what someone else says to him (63a; compare 77a). Cebes is the first to challenge Socrates' confidence in the face of imminent death (62c-e) and assumption that the soul survives separation from the body: 'the matter of the soul causes people to have strong doubts and to worry that once separated from the body it no longer exists anywhere, but is destroyed and perishes on the day when the human being dies' (70a). On the other hand, Cebes is willing to give an argument his full approval: after hearing the so-called Last Argument for the soul's immortality, he says that he cannot doubt Socrates' case (107a). Even here,

²⁴ See Rowe 1993: 292. ²⁵ Compare Warren (*forthcoming*).

²⁶ For the contrast between Simmias and Cebes, see especially Sedley 1995.

however, he continues to encourage Socrates' other friends, especially Simmias, to express all the doubts they have (107a).

By contrast, Simmias still remains in doubt at the end of the discussion, even after the Last Argument. This is not because he can point to a specific weakness in the argument, but rather, he says, 'because of the magnitude of the issues discussed in our arguments, and because of my low regard for human weakness' (107a). It is not that Simmias is incapable of noticing weaknesses in individual arguments: for example, Simmias, not Cebes, is the first to challenge Socrates' Affinity Argument (85c-86e). But in addition to this targeted scepticism Simmias has, more generally, a low opinion of human reasoning, as his response to the Last Argument shows. It sounds as if any argument Socrates offered for the immortality of the soul would leave Simmias uncertain: any such argument would be given by one human being and judged by another, and so, in Simmias' eyes, would be susceptible to 'human weakness'; and any argument on that subject would have to grapple with the issues whose 'magnitude' keeps him doubtful.

Earlier in the dialogue Simmias has explained his doubts and preferred way of proceeding (85c-d):

I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do too, that knowing the clear truth about things like this in our present life is either impossible or something extremely difficult, but that all the same not testing from every angle what is said about them, refusing to give up until one is exhausted from considering it in every way, is the mark of an extremely feeble sort of man. Because concerning them one ought surely to achieve *one* of the following: either to learn or discover how things are, or, if it is impossible to do that, at least to take the best human proposition – the hardest one to disprove – and to ride on that as if one were taking one's chances on a raft, and to sail through life that way, unless one could get through the journey with more safety and less precariousness on a more solid vehicle, some divine proposition.

Using a 'human' argument or thesis is, in Simmias' eyes, precarious, and ideally one should use a 'divine' alternative. But often one has to make do with an unsteady human construct. When Cicero summarizes Socrates' arguments and behaviour in the *Phaedo* (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.71–3), he echoes this passage without noting that the words belong to Simmias, not Socrates (1.73):

And so our speech is carried as if on a raft in a vast sea, doubting, looking around it, wavering, fearing many difficulties.

Simmias' comments chime so well with Cicero's own sceptical outlook that they might as well have been delivered by Socrates.

In Plato it is less certain that we are supposed to endorse every part of what Simmias says. Evidently, Socrates approves of Cebes' persistence in expressing his doubts, and when at the end of the debate Cebes urges other people to voice their doubts (107a), his behaviour is reminiscent of Socrates, who has previously urged his friends to put challenges to him (84c-d, 85b, 91c). But Socrates' attitude to Simmias' doubts and methodology is not as clear. Socrates does not comment explicitly on Simmias' contrast between human and divine pronouncements and his comparison of human reasoning to an unstable raft.²⁷ But, as we have seen, in the broader context of the *Phaedo* the human/divine contrast is not as clear and straightforward as Simmias believes. Socrates has only recently discussed the affinity between the soul and the divine (80a). Given that affinity, Socrates argues, a soul that has properly practised philosophy during life will go to what it resembles – not 'human evils' but 'the unseen, the divine, immortal and wise' (81a). The soul of the philosopher has more in common with the divine than with some aspects of human existence, and identifies more with the gods and the divine objects of inquiry, the Forms, than with human society or the body. It is thus highly unlikely that when Simmias talks as if there were a gulf separating the human from the divine, Plato expects his readers to accept that as the only pious or proper attitude. The part of us that constructs and evaluates arguments is the soul, and that has just been likened to the divine.

From this it might sound as if Simmias represents an incorrect form of scepticism.²⁸ But after the Last Argument Socrates seems to approve of Simmias' persistent doubts (107b):

Yes, not only that, Simmias, but you are right to say so, and besides, even if you all²⁹ find the first hypotheses trustworthy, nonetheless you should investigate them more clearly. And if you analyze the hypotheses well enough, you will follow the argument, I imagine, to the full extent possible for a human being. And if this itself becomes clear, then you will not seek anything further.

²⁷ Socrates says 'maybe you are right', but the Greek wording (φαίνεται, 85e) shows that Socrates is referring to Simmias' suspicion that the arguments given so far are not sufficient (85d), not to the 'raft' comparison.

²⁸ So Sedley 1995.

²⁹ Here Socrates switches to the second person plural, and so is speaking to other members of the group. The Greek wording is strained at the start of the passage: the point introduced by 'not only' is not properly completed. Perhaps the text at the start of the quotation should be emended to οὐ μόνος γ' (I owe this suggestion to David Sedley), which would then mean 'at least you are not alone, Simmias' and acknowledge the doubts felt by other members of the group. The switch to the second person plural would then make sense: the other friends need some advice from Socrates.

Socrates' advice deserves close scrutiny. He distinguishes between three items that Simmias and others should consider: (1) the hypotheses on which the argument relies; (2) the argument, which they may come to 'follow'; (3) an unnamed item – 'this itself' – which is not yet clear to them. It is preferable to avoid making the last point ('and if this itself becomes clear . . .') redundant, and so (3) should be something different from the argument and the hypotheses. In the passage, the most natural candidate for (3) is what directly precedes: the expression 'to the full extent possible for a human being'. That is, if Simmias and the others truly understand human nature and human limitations, they will seek nothing further than what is possible for a human being. This now goes directly *against* Simmias' contrast between the human and the divine in the 'raft' comparison; while the passage, at first glance, seems to endorse Simmias' comment on human weakness, it urges Simmias to stop aiming for something beyond the human. The arguments devised by a human being – or, more accurately, by his or her soul – may be fully sufficient. Similarly, the evaluation of arguments by a human's soul may be all that each of them needs.

Let us turn now to Simmias' attitude to the argument, the second item Socrates mentions. The Greek verb for 'follow' can mean 'understand', as in the English expression 'I don't follow' (see e.g. *Republic* 533a, *Theaetetus* 168e). But Simmias has expressed not incomprehension but doubts and a reluctance to trust the argument, and if he did not understand the argument it would be strange of Socrates not to explain it there and then. (Moreover, we are told that at least the explanation of Socrates' method seemed 'marvellously clear' to the entire group, 102a.) Probably then 'follow' suggests commitment: a resolve to make one's speech, thoughts or action conform to the argument (compare *Republic* 332d). If so, Socrates is promising something over and above mere understanding of the argument. The argument will one day gain their full commitment – or at least all the commitment a human being can give. But Socrates then urges them to see the human/divine distinction as less sharp than Simmias has presented it, and so 'human' commitment, like human arguments, may be all that they need, at least if 'human' does not exclude what belongs more strictly to the human being's soul.

The first item is the group of hypotheses that underpin the Last Argument, such as the existence of Forms and their responsibility for the qualities of perceptible items (102b).³⁰ Here Socrates subtly transforms

³⁰ It is not obvious what is included and excluded by 'first' hypothesis, but Socrates may mean the more basic claim that Forms exist, not the more advanced claim that they are responsible for features of perceptible objects. For Platonic Forms as causal, see Sedley 1998a.

Simmiās' expression of doubt and pessimism into a task for the group: the work he has undertaken with them is incomplete, and even those persuaded by the hypotheses should consider them more closely. So some of his friends should put *less* confidence in the hypotheses, not more, at least until they have been examined. On the other hand, the way in which the friends are to pursue the inquiry – through their own examination of the hypotheses – is in keeping with the strong affirmation of the human soul's ability to reason. The friends should not, like Simmiās, let things rest with a verdict of doubtfulness; they themselves have the capacity to remove residual doubts.

Socrates has already urged the entire group to put more confidence in arguments. This comes at an earlier point in the dialogue (89d-91a), where Socrates turns away from Simmiās and Cebes and urges the narrator Phaëdo not to lose confidence in arguments, or, worse still, to start to 'hate' them. Now it is the entire group, not just Simmiās, who must be put right. The narrator Phaëdo explains that, on hearing Simmiās and Cebes challenge Socrates' previous argument, the friends had lost self-confidence (88c):

They seemed to have disturbed us all over again and sent us plummeting into doubt, not just about the arguments given before, but also about what would be said later. We were worried that we might be worthless as judges, or even that the very facts of the matter might merit doubt.

Against this Socrates suggests that there may be an accurate and reliable argument which they can understand (90c-d). The way to guard against hating arguments is to examine any argument put to them, and not to trust an argument uncritically – for, according to him, people start to hate arguments when they place too much trust in an argument and then see it overthrown. So a constantly critical reception of individual arguments turns out to be the best way not to lose confidence in arguments more generally. It is not surprising, then, that Socrates ends the debate by urging his friends not to accept what he has said but to examine the hypotheses supporting the Last Argument.

Socrates' advice thus combines a strong endorsement of human reason, or rather the reasoning of the human being's soul, with encouragement to his friends not to view their task as complete. There is no tension or contradiction between these: his encouragement to his friends assumes precisely that they have it within them to find out whether his hypotheses are reliable. And for this purpose the expression of doubts by Simmiās proves useful. That is why Simmiās is not simply corrected: his expression

of doubt at the end of the debate is endorsed, but only after it is transformed into a call for inquiry into specific subjects. The *Phaedo* thus sets Socrates strongly against generalizing pessimism about the human capacity for knowledge and certainty. But it endorses the expression and exploration of doubts on particular subjects, or about individual arguments, and closes the debate by urging further inquiry into Socrates' claims about Forms.

3 *Scepticism in Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*

During the *Phaedo*, Socrates does not only present arguments for the soul's immortality; he also needs to reassure his interlocutors that they are capable of discovering whether the soul is immortal. This is typical of the way in which Plato grafts epistemology into conversations about ethics and the soul: we find similar combinations in the *Meno*, where an inquiry into virtue develops into a discussion of whether such inquiries could ever succeed, and the *Republic*, where Socrates steps back from his discussion of justice and injustice and considers how political leaders can gain the knowledge needed to promote justice in the social and political spheres. In Cicero's philosophical dialogues, there is more of an effort to make each individual dialogue speak to a specific area of philosophy, such as ethics or epistemology. His *Tusculan Disputations*, the first book of which discusses death, is part of a series of works educating Romans about Greek philosophy. Cicero's epistemological position has already been defended in another dialogue, his *On Academic Scepticism*, written earlier in the same year as the *Tusculans* (45 BC). There he defends one version of Academic scepticism, according to which philosophers should aim not for certainty but for what is plausible, or, as Cicero often says, 'like the truth'; according to Cicero's own survey of his philosophical writing (*On Divination* 2.2), *On Academic Scepticism* shows 'the kind of philosophizing I judge least arrogant, and most consistent and refined'.³¹ So we should not expect a long or detailed defence of scepticism in the *Tusculans*; that task has been undertaken elsewhere. All the same, when writing about the fear of death or some other ethical topic it is open to Cicero to signal his

³¹ Woolf 2015 is an excellent starting point for study of Cicero's scepticism. For the vocabulary of Cicero's scepticism, see Glucker 1995. Brittain 2016 finds in Cicero's *On Moral Ends* a more radical scepticism, 'expressing intractable doubt' (2016: 14). But if *On Moral Ends* does not, taken as whole, deliver a verdict even of plausibility, that may derive from the special difficulty of choosing between the leading contenders discussed there (Stoic and Antiochian theories of value); on a different subject, such as whether death is evil, Cicero may find one answer, and only one answer, plausible.

scepticism and to show its support in the writings of his philosophical heroes, above all Plato.³²

In *Tusculans* Book I, Cicero aims to show that if the soul survives death, death will be beneficial, and that it is not an evil if it is the end of us and our souls. There is an obvious resemblance between his approach and Socrates' discussion of death at the end of the *Apology*. Cicero's openness to both possibilities, annihilation and survival, might seem appropriate, given his sceptical outlook. But his scepticism, at least as it has usually been understood,³³ does not require him to withhold judgement on the outcome of death. His scepticism bars him from claiming to know with certainty whether death is the end, but as a sceptic he may give a verdict of plausibility on one side; as he puts it in *On Moral Ends* (5.76), he can give his approval to what someone else has said, and it is impossible to withhold judgement when someone's theory has been shown to be plausible.³⁴ It would have been consistent with this kind of scepticism to find plausible only one view, such as the Epicurean view that the soul is destroyed at death. And he is not accommodating to every view of death: the view that it is followed by everlasting torment is firmly rejected. Cicero's unnamed interlocutor,³⁵ who has suggested that death is an evil, is already convinced that there will not be torments like those envisaged in Homer for Tantalus and Sisyphus: 'do you think I am so crazy as to believe such stories?' (1.10). Cicero for his part has plenty to say against these stories, but the interlocutor's rejection of them requires him to move on to another question.

It is striking to see an admirer of Plato so dismissive of post-mortem punishment.³⁶ In the fictional conversation the character Cicero does not

³² Schofield 2017 surveys Cicero's use of Plato in the letters and philosophical writing.

³³ See Brittain 2016 and n.31 above.

³⁴ Compare *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.11–12; *On Duties* 3.120. See J. G. F. Powell 1995: 19; Glucker 1995; Schofield 2008: 81, 2013: 80.

³⁵ In modern editions, the speakers are usually labelled 'M' and 'A'. I will refer to 'A' simply as Cicero's interlocutor. 'M' is evidently Cicero, as he is questioned (5.32) as the author of *On Moral Ends*. He also mentions and quotes from the *Consolation* written earlier in 45 BC to comfort himself after his daughter's death (1.65–66, 1.76, 1.83, 3.70, 3.76, 4.63). Near the end of Book 1 he suggests that his reason for speaking at length about death is that he wishes to remove his own grief about those he has lost, a clear allusion to her death (1.111; compare 1.84 and 5.121). For the initials, see also Douglas 1995: 198 n.2.

³⁶ A report of Cicero's lost *Consolation* accords these stories greater respect: 'those sages, Cicero says, did not judge that the same course into heaven is open to all, for they taught that those polluted with vices and crimes are pressed down into darkness and lie in mud, whereas clean souls, pure, intact and uncorrupted, finished off with noble studies and arts, soar up to the gods – that is, to a nature similar to them – with a smooth and easy flight' (Lactantius *Divine Institutes* 3.19.6). The passage clearly recalls Plato *Phaedo* 69c, where Socrates reports the view of religious authorities that some people will lie in 'mud', whereas others will dwell with the gods. Probably then in Cicero's *Consolation* the 'sages' were religious experts, not philosophers, which would make possible a philosophical reinterpretation of their talk of 'darkness' and 'mud'. In *Tusculans* 1.72, Cicero reports Plato's suggestion in

need to give an argument against punishment in the afterlife, given the attitude of his interlocutor, but a philosophical reason for rejecting these stories emerges later (1.36–8): it is absurd to imagine a soul receiving the sort of punishment that presupposes its having a body, as when Sisyphus' soul is punished with endless physical labour. According to Cicero, this kind of story reflects a primitive attitude that has not fully distinguished between the soul and the body. We may feel uncomfortable calling an artist like Homer 'primitive', but this seems to be Cicero's point: it is an error that in his day has been removed (1.37). Later in the dialogue Cicero suggests, more charitably to Homer and other poets, that punishment like that of Sisyphus and Tantalus is a figurative representation in poetry of suffering experienced by living people (4.35).³⁷

This illustrates how Cicero is not bound by his scepticism to stay open to every story or theory about death. Why then does Cicero discuss death both as annihilation and as a change of location for the soul? Let us start with the reason given in the conversation between the character Cicero and his interlocutor. As a speaker in their exchange, Cicero argues at length that the soul is immortal (1.26–71), but he then expresses concern that in the future he and the interlocutor will be impressed by an argument for the soul's mortality (1.78). The two of them will be 'armed' for that change if they can establish that the destruction of their souls would not result in evil for them. The reason given for taking that additional precaution is the 'obscurity' of the subject (1.78): people are often swayed by clever arguments, even on clearer subjects, and this subject is difficult. As author Cicero has in fact illustrated already that arguments about the soul's immortality may fail to have a lasting effect. Previously the interlocutor said that Plato's arguments for immortality in the *Phaedo* lose their grip on him when he puts down his copy of the text (1.24). Cicero's way of proceeding implies greater confidence in arguments about the *value* of immortality or annihilation: on either view of death, people can remain convinced that it is not an evil, and that will remove their fear.³⁸ This contrast between the 'obscure' question of whether the soul survives and

the *Phaedo* that some souls will not join the gods but avoids suggesting that there will be physical punishment for them. Cicero is most firmly opposed to stories of post-mortem punishment that treat the soul as still embodied.

³⁷ Compare Lucretius' more famous claim that the real hell, or Acheron, is experienced by living people on earth (3.978–1023).

³⁸ Cicero does not provide a theory of emotions in Book 1. But later in the *Tusculans*, he outlines a Stoic view of the emotions which in retrospect explains his approach to the fear of death: 'there is one way of healing both distress and the other diseases of the soul: showing that they are all a matter of opinion and voluntary, and accepted because that is thought to be correct' (4.83). If the fear of

the less difficult question of value, where stable belief is possible, is different from his global outlook as an Academic sceptic, according to which on *every* subject we can aim for nothing more than plausibility. All the same, Cicero tells his interlocutor, at the key moment of transition, that they should not put too much confidence in *anything* (*nihil nimis oportet confidere*, 1.78), and this looks like a nod to his scepticism.

Cicero also sees an important connection between scepticism and universality in the treatment of a question: whereas members of another school, such as Epicureanism, are restricted to the school's doctrines, as a sceptic he can let his discussion range over the entire set of doctrines on a given subject (*On Academic Scepticism* 2.8–9; *Tusculans* 4.7, 5.82–3). Indeed, this is not only possible but obligatory; as a sceptic all questions should be considered open, and so he must consider all views on a subject before he pronounces one view the most plausible.³⁹ Not that all the views will receive equally extensive treatment: some, such as the belief in post-mortem torture like that of Tantalus, are so implausible that they can be dismissed quickly. But evidently the doctrine that the soul will be destroyed at death does not fall into this class. Some philosophers, such as the Epicureans, have written arguments against the immortality of the soul (1.77). Cicero must either show what is wrong with those arguments or at least show that they do not throw into question his claim that death will not be an evil.

There is another reason for Cicero to aim for universality in his discussion of death, and it has to do not with his scepticism but with the *Tusculans* in particular. The dialogue aims to show how philosophy – not a particular school, but philosophy itself – speaks to various human concerns: anxiety about death, pain, our chances of happiness, and indeed anxiety about anxiety itself, the thought that people will feel destabilizing emotions no matter how much they improve their character.⁴⁰ It suits that view of Cicero's project to show philosophers from different traditions converging on a single message or position. The most impressive demonstration of this comes at the end of the fifth book, where philosophers, including even the Epicureans, are lined up behind the claim that wisdom is sufficient for happiness. But already in the first book philosophers –

death derives from a belief or opinion that death is evil, then it is reasonable for Cicero to address it by means of arguments showing that death is not an evil.

³⁹ Compare Woolf 2015: 31 and 211.

⁴⁰ 'Philosophy' reduces distress, fear and desire (1.119); 'philosophy brings this about: it heals souls, removes empty concerns, frees us from desires and drives out fears' (2.11). I have benefited here from discussion with Malcolm Schofield.

Epicureans no less than Plato – are being brought together, in this case against the claim that death is an evil. Of course, death would be an evil if what followed were everlasting torment. So it becomes urgent to present that view not as a pronouncement of philosophy but a failing, at an earlier stage in human development, to distinguish the soul from the body. Philosophy proper shows death not to be an evil, either because the soul will be destroyed and no longer be aware of what it has lost, or because it will pass to some superior mode of existence.

Even after Cicero has argued against the reality of punishment in the afterlife, he faces a major challenge in making philosophy pronounce only two outcomes possible. Perhaps not surprisingly, the theory of reincarnation is passed over in silence.⁴¹ But Cicero provides a survey of theories of the soul (1.18–23), and with some ingenuity condenses them to two plausible outcomes at death. Some views are rejected, such as the denial that there is such a thing as a soul, or the Stoic view that the soul has only temporary survival after death (1.41, 1.78). If, as some theorists hold, the soul is a part or organ of the human body, such as the brain or heart, then it will be destroyed together with the rest of the body (1.18–19, 24). But if the soul is composed of a physical element, such as air or fire, as in Stoicism (1.19, 42), then its fate after death will be determined by the characteristic behaviour of that element, which for air and fire is to be carried up into the sky, where the soul will either survive or be dispersed (1.40–2). If it is dispersed, we are back at the outcome of annihilation. If it survives, the greater affinity between the soul and its new environment will make that outcome preferable to life on earth (1.43). His exploration of post-mortem survival is reminiscent of the Affinity Argument from the *Phaedo*, but now with a corporeal view of both the soul and the gods. The soul is divine, and for that reason immortal (1.66), and after separation from the body its fate will be to come to items that resemble it: a region whose lightness and heat resembles its own (1.43) and gods composed of the same physical stuff (1.65–6).⁴² To us this may seem

⁴¹ Cicero could defend that silence at least in the case of Empedocles: Empedocles is said to hold that the soul is blood, which according to Cicero commits him to the view that the soul is destroyed at death, no matter what his poetry may have said about previous lives (1.19, 24). The Pythagoreans are made to teach immortality (1.38–9), but not reincarnation. On one interpretation (Yli-Karjanmaa 2017: 515), Cicero mentions reincarnation at 1.72 ('an easy return to those from whom they had set out'). But I think it more plausible, in the context, to view these as the gods, not (say) human organisms. The soul's divine origin has been mentioned at 1.66; see also *Phaedo* 80d, 82b–c, 85a, and n.36 above.

⁴² In his comments on the soul's divinity, Cicero goes further than Plato: he suggests that the soul is, or will become, a god (1.65, 76). Cicero's account thus differs from Plato's in allowing for a union, after death, with other souls: souls will join gods after death, but if souls also become gods, some of the gods they join may themselves be souls. But Cicero does not make that conclusion explicit here.

a bizarre distortion of Plato, but Cicero probably regards a corporealist interpretation as the most charitable way of taking Plato's theory of the soul; it seems revealing that when Plato's theory is included in the survey, he fails to mention that the Platonic soul is incorporeal. Instead, he focusses on its tripartition and location in the body, both of which are compatible with its being some corporeal stuff, such as fire or air (1.20).

Often in Cicero there is a connection between scepticism and argument both for and against a proposal or theory, which would in this case mean arguments both for and against the badness of death. For example, in another dialogue on ethics, *On Moral Ends*, representatives of three philosophical traditions explain and defend theories about value and moral development, and in each case Cicero himself then speaks against the theory as critic. In that dialogue (2.2–3), he represents argument on either side as good sceptical procedure: before a theory, such as the Epicurean theory of value, is criticized, it is right to let an Epicurean both state his position and argue for it.⁴³ But in that passage he mentions an alternative sceptical practice, currently used in the Academy, where a position or thesis is simply stated before the case against it is given in continuous speech. To an extent, this matches what we find in the *Tusculans*, where his interlocutor does not expound theories or represent a particular school of philosophy, such as Epicureanism or Stoicism; rather, he proposes a thesis, such as that death is bad, and Cicero then attacks it.⁴⁴ The practice is associated with no less a philosopher than Socrates: 'as you know, this is the old Socratic method of arguing against the other person's opinion; Socrates thought that in this way what is most similar to the truth can be discovered with the greatest ease' (1.8; compare 5.11). In Book 1, Cicero responds to his interlocutor's proposal first with a series of questions, and then with a speech. When he starts to give a continuous speech, he seizes the opportunity to reassert his scepticism and to signal that, despite speaking in this mode, he is not making a claim to knowledge or certainty (1.17):

I will explain what you want as best I can, but not with a view to making certain or fixed pronouncements, as if I were Delphic Apollo, but as one feeble human being out of many, speculatively pursuing what is plausible; for I cannot progress beyond seeing what is like the truth. Certainty will be for those who claim that such things can be known and declare themselves to be sages.

⁴³ Compare *On Divination* 2.150; *Tusculans* 2.9. ⁴⁴ See Schofield 2008: 66 n.8.

This is Cicero's version of the 'human weakness' claim.⁴⁵ The statement of his limitations explains the following survey of philosophical views about the soul (1.18–23): the speaker is merely 'one human being out of many', but the 'many' – that is, other philosophers – can be brought into the discussion by reporting and examining their theories.

Cicero considers death both as annihilation and the start of discarnate existence, but he does not give the interlocutor a speech or theory showing death to be an evil. Why does Cicero not present arguments on either side, as in *On Moral Ends*? By giving his interlocutor merely proposals, not a whole ethical theory, Cicero avoids associating him with a particular school, and that facilitates the suggestion that philosophy itself replies, if not with a single voice, then at least with several voices that converge on the most important points. Cicero may also suppose that the interlocutor's proposals (e.g. death is an evil, pain is an evil) have strong intrinsic credibility, and so do not need the defence that is needed when explaining a theory, such as the Epicurean theory of goodness. All the same, he does permit the interlocutor to defend or modify his proposals. This gives the *Tusculans* special importance in the ancient literature on death, for the interlocutor makes some points to explain or justify the fear of death, on a view of death as annihilation, that are usually not given a hearing. For example, according to the interlocutor fearing death is not necessarily to think that it will be evil to lack all awareness; instead, the concern may be that it is evil, during life, to have the inevitable prospect of lacking awareness (1.26). The evil of death may thus be its effect on life when we reflect that at some point we will no longer enjoy what we value or take pleasure in. 'What delight can there be in life, when day and night we must reflect that we have to die at any moment?' (1.14).⁴⁶ Cicero's reply is that the goodness or badness of the prospect of death depends on the value of death itself. If being dead is not an evil, there can be nothing evil in the fact that we must die, for that means merely that we will enter a state that is not evil (1.16).

The interlocutor makes another important point against attempts at consolation when he rejects Cicero's use of a so-called Symmetry argument (1.13). This is a comparison, frequently used in consolatory philosophy, between non-existence after death and prenatal non-existence; in the following chapters, we will see uses of such arguments

⁴⁵ Elsewhere he says that only a god knows the real constituents of the human soul; ascertaining which theory is most *like* the truth is a large enough undertaking (1.23).

⁴⁶ See Warren 2004: 5.

in Epicureanism and elsewhere. Cicero's interlocutor is unimpressed by the comparison: 'you are making jokes as if I were calling miserable the unborn, not the dead'. He then suggests that one is made miserable or wretched by no longer existing *after previously existing*, which of course applies only to the dead, not the unborn; he thus denies that being dead is similar, in the respect in which it is an evil, to prenatal non-existence.⁴⁷ Death involves a deprivation of something previously possessed, not merely a lack or absence. Unfortunately, we may think, his rejection of the Symmetry argument is cut short by an objection from Cicero: one cannot consistently say both that the dead do not exist and that they *are* wretched or miserable. The interlocutor tries to evade this by removing the verb 'to be': his proposal is now in effect changed from a thesis, 'the dead are wretched', to simply calling the dead 'wretched'. But Cicero dispenses quickly with that too: if the interlocutor is to say anything at all, he must give a proposition that is either true or false. And he fails to do that if he wriggles out of saying that the dead *are* wretched (1.13–14).

A difficulty for the interlocutor is that his proposal about the dead has come to involve the adjective 'wretched' or 'miserable' (*miser*), which in Latin suggests a psychological state. Originally he said merely that death is an evil (1.9), but he then allowed Cicero to take that to mean that death makes people wretched. It seems plausible for Cicero then to insist that anyone 'wretched' or 'miserable' must exist (1.12) and have awareness (1.89): anyone miserable must possess a functioning mind or soul.⁴⁸ The interlocutor would have done better to resist the introduction of this adjective from the outset and stuck to his claim that death is an evil. An alternative way of developing it is as a counterfactual: death is an evil for people when it would have been better for them to be alive. That looks exclusively to the pleasures or other experiences that death denies the person, and avoids suggesting that, as things stand, the dead person is put into an adverse psychological condition by the deprivation. The same point can be applied to deprivation itself: if deprivation is treated as a psychological state, such as feeling a lack (1.87–8), then the interlocutor cannot attribute it to the dead, as Cicero argues. But a counterfactual description of the deprivation – if he had not died he would have spent longer with his family – can avoid this.

⁴⁷ So Warren 2004: 44 n.41.

⁴⁸ Compare Woolf 2015: 205.

4 Summary

In the *Apology*, Socrates is famously uncertain whether death is followed by the total lack of awareness and or the survival of the soul in a new location. Either way, he says, death will benefit him. But from the point of view of ethics, it is his earlier comments that should be emphasized, where even the value of death, not only its outcome, was uncertain. The ethical model given in the speech is of someone so convinced of the evil of injustice and impiety that he disregards the risk that he might be executed for continuing to practise philosophy and also the possibility that his death might be an evil for him. During his life, and while the outcome of the trial was still being contested, he has had to make choices from a position of uncertainty about whether death is good or bad.

In Cicero, there was a connection between his scepticism and his willingness to evaluate death according to both of the views originally distinguished by Socrates. But that connection was not as simple as we might suppose, for the mark of his scepticism is not indecision but comprehensiveness: as a sceptic, he is obliged to consider all philosophical views on a subject, and it takes some work to show that the possibilities for the soul at death countenanced by philosophy boil down to immortality and annihilation. Cicero's survey suggests the following: Socrates may have been ignorant of the psychological theories that would be advanced by Stoics, Epicureans and others, but examination of such theories show him to have been right all along to consider only those two outcomes. And beliefs about the goodness or badness of those outcomes can be made to stick, unlike belief in the soul's immortality.

In much of the book I am exploring the contrasts and disagreements between different philosophical treatments of death and immortality. So it is worth pausing to note that we find a quite different view of philosophy in Cicero's dialogue, according to which philosophers come together in rejecting the view that death is an evil. Cicero strives to combine learned surveys of philosophical debate and disagreement with this view of philosophy as a unified source of comfort: somehow philosophy is one as well as many, at least when speaking to our most urgent concerns about death, value and happiness. To an extent, this view of the unity of philosophy echoes what we find already in the *Phaedo*, where philosophers – or at least genuine philosophers – speak to each other with one voice about death (66b-67b), despite the philosophical debate and disagreement that Plato's dialogue itself then illustrates.

This brings me finally to the question of scepticism in the *Phaedo*. Plato expresses, and makes Socrates respond to, doubts both about whether the soul is immortal and about whether human beings can find out the truth in such a difficult area. The view of the soul as divine may seem reassuring, but it introduces new uncertainty: the soul's orientation to items that really are divine, not just (like the soul itself) similar to the divine, throws into doubt the assumption, at the end of the *Apology*, that a soul that survives death and retains its awareness will be united with other souls – particularly if, as in the case of a philosopher, the soul is acting maximally in accordance with its own nature. And yet this view of the soul also makes it harder to disparage human reason in a comparison with divine pronouncement. The debate of the *Phaedo* closes with a strong endorsement, by Socrates, of human reason and our capacity to resolve doubt and uncertainty. As a sceptical admirer of Plato, Cicero has to read the *Phaedo* selectively – and with some inattention to who says what.

Epicurean Evaluations of Death

1 What Happens When We Die?

In this and the [next chapter](#), I focus on Epicurean and Stoic discussions of the correct attitude to death. Both traditions also discussed, and provide examples of, practical decisions relating to death, particularly about mourning, suicide and the writing of wills.¹ Neither tradition was satisfied with showing death not to be an evil: the philosopher must still consider how to secure the interests of those he or she will leave behind, and in what circumstances death becomes not merely non-evil but actually worthy of choice. There was more to their philosophy of death than learning how to confront it without fear. On the other hand, attitudes to death take centre stage in some of their best-known writing, particularly in Epicureanism. Epicurus' slogan was that death is 'nothing to us', and later Epicureans such as Lucretius and Philodemus repeated that slogan even when developing new arguments or considering, more broadly than Epicurus had, all the ways in which death can cause people anxiety or concern.

According to Epicureans, what happens when somebody dies? Epicureans agree with most other ancient philosophers that the functions and capacities of the human being are best explained by means of a distinction between the soul and the body. In Epicureanism, both the soul and the body are corporeal items, and death occurs at their separation. The soul and the body share responsibility for sensation, and sensation is possible only when the two are combined:

¹ I discuss suicide in chapter 7. Epicurus' will is discussed in Warren 2004, chapter 5, and very briefly below (p. 138). For Epicurean attitudes to mourning and grief, see the quotation of Metrodorus in Seneca *Letter* 99.25, Plutarch *Epicurus makes a pleasant life impossible* 1101a-b; Armstrong 2008: 88, 96 and 118 n.22; Konstan 2013. Seneca discusses how to mourn and keep in mind dead friends in *Letter* 63.

We must grasp that the soul has the most responsibility for sensation (τῆς αἰσθήσεως), but the soul would not have acquired sensation if it were not enclosed in some way by the rest of the aggregate. (*Letter to Herodotus* 63)

The Greek word translated by ‘sensation’, *aisthēsis*, is ambiguous between sense-perception (the five senses, such as hearing and vision) and, more generally, awareness, which would include memory. Epicurus uses the same word and its cognates when discussing death (*Key Doctrine* 2, *Letter to Menoeceus* 24), and in these contexts he is denying that after death the soul has any awareness at all, not just that it no longer sees, smells and so on. Here he follows a common Greek way of talking about death, and when Greek writers or speakers ask whether the dead have *aisthēsis*, they are asking in the most general terms whether the dead have awareness, either of anything at all or of what happens among the living, not whether the dead still have the five senses.² By contrast, in the *Letter to Herodotus* Epicurus is thinking primarily of sense-perception: he is trying to show the body’s share of responsibility and the extent to which the body can be said to have *aisthēsis*, and sense-perception raises those questions with special force. But even here he has in mind other forms of awareness and cognition: he says that the body shares in *aisthēsis*, but not ‘of all those which the soul has’ (64), which seems to refer to non-sensory modes of awareness. If this is right, then he is arguing that the body can be described as a subject or co-subject of only sensory awareness, although without the body no awareness at all, sensory or otherwise, is possible.³ The joint responsibility of soul and body for awareness has an important consequence for death: after death neither the body nor the soul has awareness (64–5). Indeed, the soul depends on the body not only for sensation but also for its physical integrity, as without the body nothing will give it the coherence it needs to persist. When Epicureans write about attitudes to death, they emphasize sometimes the non-existence of the soul after death, sometimes its lack of awareness. That should not surprise us, for the enclosing body, during life, makes a twofold contribution to the soul, preventing disintegration and making awareness possible.

2 Death in Epicurean Ethics

Before we turn to arguments about the goodness or badness of death, we should aim to understand the special place of the philosophy of death within

² Hyperides *Funeral Oration* 43; Isocrates 9.2, 19.42. Compare Plato *Menexenus* 248b–c. For discussion, see Dover 1994: 243 and Currie 2005: 38.

³ Compare Lucretius 3.350–8.

Epicureanism. Although the Stoics frequently return to the subject of death, it does not occupy the same foundational role in their ethics as it does in Epicureanism. Death is the subject of Epicurus' second *Key Doctrine* (the first is about the gods). In his summary of his ethical teaching, the *Letter to Menoeceus*, death occupies the same prominent position: after discussing the correct conception of the gods, he turns directly to death. In the *Letter*, he defends his claim that death is nothing to us, but he also describes conflicting attitudes to death and attacks the sentiment that an early death is to be welcomed by all as a relief from the evils of life. (Notice that Epicurus is not denying that suicide is ever the rational choice – the view he is attacking is that an early death is in the interests of everyone alive.) In Lucretius' poem about the universe, human beings and their atomic components, the longest ethical section (the finale of Book 3) is about the fear of death. Why is death so prominent in Epicurean writing?

Part of the explanation lies in Epicurean beliefs about making human life as good as it can be. According to Epicurus, goodness is easily available, and this shifts the emphasis in Epicurean writing towards removing badness – which is to say, removing bodily pain or mental distress, including fear. By contrast, Stoics argue for a very restricted view of goodness, such that only the virtuous person has good things present in his or her life. In an overview of Stoic ethics this needs to be defended: the Stoic author must make it a priority to describe what it means for goodness to feature in a life, and to show that it fits the readers' expectations of goodness. But in Epicureanism all pleasures are good, and so everyone who experiences pleasure experiences goodness. It follows that even the people standardly criticized by Epicureans – the superstitious, the undisciplined and the politically ambitious – experience goodness very often. The thrill experienced by successful politicians is genuinely good, as is the glee of a conventional religious believer who mistakenly supposes his neighbour to be divinely punished, even though Epicurus would deny that either person is admirable. The distinguishing feature of the admirable person is not the experience of goodness but minimizing badness in his or her life. If pain and mental distress are completely removed, pleasures take their place, and the person reaches the highest level of happiness available, where no further increase is possible: 'the removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures' (*Key Doctrine* 3).⁴

This shows why Epicureans emphasize the removal of evils – pain, distress and anxiety – more than the nature and attainment of goodness.

⁴ See Wolsdorf 2012: 158–67. Wolsdorf uses the apt expression 'analgesic hedonism' of Epicureanism.

It does not yet show why so much importance is attached to removing anxiety about *death*. Certain pains, such as the physical pain of an illness, will be experienced no matter how well we reason, but some fears and anxieties – the mental kind of evil – can be removed with the aid of philosophy. In Epicureanism, there is a distinction between ‘empty’ and non-empty evil. An empty evil, such as a fear of something that is not actually harmful, can and should be removed by means of reasoning. A non-empty evil, such as physical pain, can (in some cases) be medically treated and will ease over time, but it cannot be removed by reasoning about it. The urgency and the optimism of Epicurean writing about death come from their treating the fear of being dead as an ‘empty’ evil. (As Epicureans recognized, not every fear relating to death is the fear of being dead, a point brought out particularly clearly by Philodemus, as we will see.) All that an invalid in the grip of pain can do is seek medical attention and counterbalance his physical pain with such pleasures as are available to him. In a letter, Epicurus himself provided an example: when suffering from painful illness he set against the pain the memory of past conversations (Diogenes Laertius 10.22). In this case, the illness was in fact terminal – this is a deathbed letter – but the pleasure counterbalances physical pain, not the fear of death. ‘Empty’ fears can be completely removed, not merely counterbalanced, and so in his ethical writing Epicurus focusses his attention here, where reasoning can make the most difference. Angry gods are shown to be non-existent, as the correct conception of god is in fact of a quite different creature. Unlike angry or vengeful gods, death is of course real, but he shows that its relation to us is not such as for it to be a suitable object of fear. In his words, it is nothing to us.

One consequence of considering death with these aims is that the philosophy that prepares us for death has to be philosophy about death itself.⁵ It is essential to consider whether death is a suitable object of fear. This may seem obvious, but it points to an important difference between Epicurus and Plato. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates says that philosophy is preparation for death (64a-69e), and he does not mean that the *philosophy of death* is the preparation. His point is that the philosophical reflections he has undertaken throughout his life – trying to understand goodness or some other Form – begin to separate the soul from the body and so prepare it for the full separation that is death. The philosophical inquiry could thus be about something other than death, such as goodness, courage or justice.

⁵ But if we take Epicurus at his word in *Letter to Menoeceus* 126, someone is ready to die only when they understand how to live. See p. 132.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the philosophy of death makes no contribution at all to preparing Socrates for his own death: on the contrary, the conversation of the *Phaedo* is largely, though not exclusively, about the soul's immortality and its fate at death, and it is natural to connect the philosophical work done in that conversation to Socrates' calmness when the poison is brought to him. But his lifelong practice of philosophy has also played its part in preparing him for death. Similarly, in the *Republic* (486a-b) philosophers are said to be especially unconcerned about death, and again Socrates does not mean that they have spent time philosophizing *about death*. Philosophy more generally does the preparatory work of weakening one's concern for the body. We will see Stoics echoing this Platonic idea of philosophy – not the philosophy of death alone – preparing one for death.

There is a second explanation of the prominence of death in Epicurean writing, and it concerns a tension in their ethics. In Epicureanism, as in Stoicism, the gods are ethical models for human beings, and the perfection of our nature is to become godlike. That goal is attainable by human beings: according to Epicurus human happiness can fully equal divine happiness.⁶ That Epicurean ethics has this aim is particularly clear in the structure of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, which starts with people, young or old, who are untouched by philosophy, and ends with the promise that the reader will live as a god among people. The trajectory of the letter is thus from the need to start philosophy to godlike existence. How is it possible for mortal creatures, like us, to become godlike?⁷ In Epicurean theology, the 'imperishability' of gods is constantly in view, and it is sometimes associated with their other admirable features. Consider, for example, Lucretius' description of how our ancestors first formed the notion of gods (5.1161–93). Once our ancestors came to believe that the gods had 'everlasting life', they inferred that the gods must be outstandingly happy – and one reason was that the gods lacked the fear of death (1175, 1180). How exactly can human beings aim for the same level of happiness as creatures that last forever? In particular, why should we not be troubled by the fear of

⁶ See 'equal to the gods' in Diogenes Laertius 10.5, Plutarch *Epicurus makes a pleasant life impossible* 1091b–c. In a letter to his mother (preserved in Diogenes of Oenoanda 125, Smith 1993), Epicurus says that his disposition is 'equal to the gods', that 'mortality' does not make him fall short of 'the imperishable and blessed nature' and that he experiences as much joy as the gods do.

⁷ This may seem a problem for Stoics no less than for Epicureans, but, as I argued above (chapter 3, section 3), Chrysippus suggested that the souls of virtuous people can, after death, share the 'immortality' of intra-cosmic gods, which does not entail everlastingness. By contrast, the *Letter to Menoeceus* suggests that people can possess immortal goods, but (unlike some other passages) it does not describe people as immortal or imperishable (see chapter 3, section 2).

death, given that, unlike gods, we will die? There is in Epicureanism an awkward fit, but not an actual contradiction, between (1) the claim that humans can be as happy as gods, (2) the belief in the imperishability of all gods and (3) the denial of an everlasting future for human beings and their souls. Human mortality thus urgently needs to be addressed in an Epicurean account of human godlikeness.

As I explored Epicurean imperishability in [chapter 3, section 2](#), I will focus here on the parts of their response that are most directly concerned with human attitudes to death. One part is to show that we do not need to fear death, and so that we, mortal as we are, can spend our finite existence as untroubled by the fear of death as the gods are. Another part is to deny that an infinitely long period of pleasurable existence contains more pleasure than a finite period: ‘infinite time and finite time contain equal pleasure, provided that one measures the limits of pleasure by reasoning’ (*Key Doctrine* 19). In order to make sense of this, consider Epicurus’ conception of pleasure as automatically filling the void, so to speak, left by pain. In fact, Epicurean atomism provides a helpful analogy, as Sedley has argued.⁸ A given volume is either empty or occupied by atoms. Imagine a volume that is entirely occupied and could not become any more full. It could become full over a longer period, but that is not the same as becoming more full, even if the fullness persists over an infinitely long period. Compare Aristotle’s celebrated response to Plato (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 1096b3–5):

The Good will not be any more good by being eternal, unless what is white for a long time is whiter than something that is white for just a day.

Stoics too accept this basic distinction between maximizing goodness and prolonging it. In Stoicism, goodness is the perfection of reason, and once a person’s reason has been perfected she or he has received goodness in full. They may enjoy goodness over a longer period, but that does not entail that they receive more of it. This is relevant both to their theology and to their account of human beings: neither virtuous people nor the gods that have only finitely long existence lack goodness. Every god is ‘perfect . . . in happiness’ (Diogenes Laertius 7.147).

The writing of Lucretius suggests a third explanation for the prominence of death in Epicurean writing. The fear of death is responsible for *other* human evils (3.37–40):

⁸ Sedley 1998b. For further discussion of pleasures in Epicureanism, see Wolfsdorf 2012, chapter 7.

That fear of Acheron (i.e. the Underworld) must be driven out headlong, the fear which throws human life into chaos from the bottom up, staining everything with the blackness of death, and leaves no pleasure serene and pure.

Such a fear especially requires attention and treatment. Later in the passage Lucretius connects the fear of death to desires for wealth and political power: people regard low position and poverty as bringing them close to death – ‘lingering before the gates of death’ (3.78) – and try to get away from death by securing wealth and power, even by breaking the law or through civil war. We might protest that there are other causes of avarice and political ambition, but Lucretius does not deny that – he says that the fear of death is responsible ‘to a significant extent’ (64).

Lucretius is not unique in connecting the fear of death to immoral behaviour. Torquatus, the spokesman for Epicureanism in Cicero’s *On Moral Ends*, argues that the fear of death has caused people to betray parents, friends and country (1.49).⁹ But Lucretius may be placing special emphasis on that connection in order to justify the prominence of death in his tightly organized poem. In particular he connects the fear of death to behaviour of which his Roman readership had a special horror, such as civil war. But any Epicurean would welcome the sentiment that we confront the subject of death in order to make the pleasures of life ‘serene and pure’. As Epicurus himself says, getting yourself ready to die well also makes you ready to live well (*Letter to Menoeceus* 126).

3 *Epicurus on Death*

3a *The Diagnosis and Key Doctrine 2*

Let us read Epicurus’ diagnosis of the fear of death before we see what he offers as the cure. In the *Letter to Herodotus*, he discusses what causes people the most distress (81). Characteristically, he starts with the gods and incorrect theological beliefs. After that he turns to death and considers which thoughts about death have the most powerful emotional effect:

Expecting or suspecting that there is something *everlasting* to dread, because of the myths or because they fear the very lack of awareness in death, as if it had some bearing on them; and experiencing this not by judgements but rather by some irrational attitude, with the result that people do not set

⁹ On the relationship between this passage and Epicurus’ own writing, see Sedley 1998b: 148–50.

limits around what they dread and so their distress is equal to, or even more intense than, someone who has a baseless judgement about these things.

The passage is important for understanding Epicurus' priorities when he writes about death. The fears that most urgently need to be removed are not about the process of dying or the fate of the loved ones we leave behind us when we die – even though people may experience acute anxiety about both of those. The very worst fears are rather about something everlasting: either punishment and misery, as suggested by myths, or the lack of awareness. Notice that what focusses attention on the dying person's own future, rather than the future of the loved ones whom he predeceases, is not egoism so much as everlastingness (in the Greek, 'everlasting' is placed first for emphasis). What awaits the dying person is, he or she suspects, unending, whereas the survivors affected for the worse by the death will not be impoverished or lonely forever. Similarly, the process of dying will of course have an ending. Given this account of where the worst distress comes from, we should expect Epicurus' philosophical therapy to focus on the thoughts people have about their own future after death.

Epicurus then attributes these fears to an 'irrational attitude'. Here he cannot mean simply that people are reasoning poorly when they are affected by myths or dread the lack of awareness, for he contrasts this attitude with 'baseless judgements', which are themselves poorly reasoned. His point is rather that people afflicted by these fears have not articulated for themselves an account of precisely what will happen and of what makes it evil, and so cannot be said to have a 'judgement' about it. As such, they can be contrasted with the people who have some specific view or theory about the afterlife – from Epicurus' perspective there is only one correct theory, but each of the alternatives would at least constitute a judgement. We might think that it would be worse to believe something specific, but Epicurus tries to show that the vagueness of the attitude compounds their misery: only after someone has adopted some position on the future can he or she reason about just how bad it will be. At first sight, it is puzzling to see Epicurus suggesting that the people influenced by myths do *not* have a judgement: surely myths represent the souls of wicked people, such as Tantalus or Sisyphus, receiving certain punishments in a specific location, such as Tartarus. But presumably Epicurus thinks that when we are induced by these myths to fear something for ourselves, the envisaged punishment is no longer so sharply defined. This has some plausibility: people intimidated by the punishment of Tantalus will fear something

unpleasant for themselves after death, but need not suppose that their punishment will be exactly the same as his.

This comment on the ‘irrational attitude’ does not imply that the fear of death derives from some separate, irrational part of the human mind, and it certainly does not imply that the fear cannot be addressed by reasoning. Epicurus means merely that the people who dread the lack of awareness have not actually articulated for themselves the relevant judgements, such as ‘I will lose awareness and this will be an evil for me’. Once this has been spelled out for them, they may come to see that what they dread is not really a suitable object of fear. The passage is thus compatible with optimism about the power of arguments to address the fear.¹⁰ On the other hand, Epicurus does not seem to believe that the fear of death depends exclusively on social conditioning, such as gruesome stories about the underworld: some people are influenced by such myths, but others have, without fully expressing it, a dread of the lack of awareness, and the second source of fear could arise simply from seeing what happens to the body at death. Compare Lucretius’ comments on early human history, where he says that our distant ancestors, when they first started to revere the gods, reasoned that the gods have *no fear of death* and so must be outstandingly happy (5.1179–80). These early people must have been comparing the gods’ happiness with their own happiness, and so they must have contrasted their own fear of death with the gods’ lack of fear. That suggests that people feared death *before* they produced, under the influence of false theological beliefs, myths about punishment in the afterlife.

The shortest expression of Epicurus’ therapy comes in the second of his *Key Doctrines*:

Death is nothing to us. For what has been disintegrated lacks awareness (ἀναισθητεῖ), and that which lacks awareness (τὸ ἀναισθητοῦν) is nothing to us.

Consider the difference between the following two arguments:

- (1) Anything of which we are unaware is nothing to us. When we are dead we are unaware of death. So death is nothing to us.
- (2) Anyone or anything that has no awareness is nothing to us. After death what remains of us has no awareness. So what remains of us after death is nothing to us.

¹⁰ A further question is how Epicurus would regard the relationship between the emotion, in this case distress, and the belief. For Epicurean philosophy of emotions, see Gill 2009.

Argument (1) concerns the value or disvalue of death itself – is it something good or bad for us? It seeks to draw comfort from our unawareness, at the time when we are dead, of our death. By contrast, argument (2) concerns our attitude to what death separates, the soul and the body. Its goal is to show that neither of them is, when separated, a suitable object of concern. The two arguments turn on different ways of understanding ‘nothing to us’. In argument (1), it means ‘neither good nor bad for us’ and so marks a contrast with the pains and pleasures we experience and which, having value or disvalue, are ‘something to us’. In argument (2), it means ‘not a suitable object of concern for us’, and the contrast-items are not pains or pleasures but people, most straightforwardly ourselves, who have or will have awareness. The future self who will be alive tomorrow is something to me; it is rational to avoid acting in a way that would bring him, or me, harm, and it is rational to experience fear if I know that tomorrow will bring me pain. But that kind of fear or concern is not appropriate when I think about my separated, oblivious soul, or about the equally oblivious body from which it has been detached.

Another difference is that argument (1) is about objects of awareness, whereas argument (2) is about subjects of awareness. The Greek wording shows that in this passage Epicurus is advancing argument (2). As it happens, the Greek words are deceptively similar – ἀναισθητον (unperceived or unnoticed), ἀναισθητοῦν (unperceiving or, as here, not aware) – but in this case he speaks of the subjects of awareness. Moreover, if Epicurus were using argument (1), the *Doctrine* should have commented on awareness of *death* specifically: he should have said not only that after death we lack awareness, but that there is no awareness of death. But he says nothing about being oblivious to being dead. The obvious objection is that on this interpretation the *Doctrine* opens with a comment on death and then moves to a conclusion about something else, namely, what remains of us after death.¹¹ But, as we have seen, Epicurus believes that the most acute fears relating to death are precisely about our own everlasting future after death. So in this compressed argument he reasonably focusses on these fears and shows that neither the separated soul nor the separated body is the kind of item for which we should feel concern.

The contrast between arguments (1) and (2) highlights a further feature of this passage. Argument (2) assumes that rational fears involve a trio: I (a) fear that some event (b) will befall a person or item that has awareness (c).

¹¹ In antiquity, Alexander objected that Epicurus’s conclusion should have been ‘what has been disintegrated is nothing to us’, not ‘death is nothing to us’ (*On Aristotle’s Prior Analytics* 346.14–17).

In many cases (a) and (c) will be one and the same person. What is irrational is feeling a fear where no conscious person (or, we might add, animal) can be included as the third party, (c). This assumes merely that someone or something conscious must feature in the fear as the relevant part of the concern; it does not assume that the event must itself be noticed by the person for whom one feels fear. In argument (1), by contrast, it is assumed that an event must be noticed for it to have value or disvalue. It is compatible with argument (2) to feel concern on someone's behalf for what will happen to her during her lifetime but of which she will remain unaware. Epicurus may reject that in his other arguments against the fear of death, but it is worth noting that he does not yet need to do so.

On the reading proposed here, Epicurus' point is that after death has occurred, the items for which people feel the most concern – namely, their own body and soul – lack awareness and so are not proper objects of concern. This is an awkwardly elaborate construal of 'nothing to us'. Why not suppose that he means simply that death is itself neither good nor bad, and then interpret 'nothing to us' to mean 'neither good nor bad' throughout the argument? But that cannot be the correct interpretation – the pain of a headache and the pleasure a scientist derives from a discovery do not themselves have awareness, and yet they are, according to Epicurus, an evil and a good, respectively. So when Epicurus says that what lacks awareness is nothing to us, he cannot mean that it is neither good nor bad. We must therefore find some other interpretation of 'nothing to us', such as the one proposed above, and that in turn supports the admittedly elaborate reading of the claim that death is nothing to us.

Within this *Doctrine*, Epicurus does not spell out the implications of his argument for our attitude to the deaths of other people, or our attitude to the future of those who are dear to us and will outlive us. But before we move on to other passages, it is worth thinking about the interpersonal application of this doctrine – and especially to see to what extent it would constrain a later Epicurean author, such as Philodemus, who wished to explore a wider range of anxieties relating to death. If anything that lacks awareness is 'nothing to us', in the sense of not being a suitable object of concern, then when a friend or relative dies we should not feel concern for the body or soul of the deceased. This leaves it open whether we should feel concern for ourselves when a friend dies before us, for we of course retain our awareness. Compare the last *Key Doctrine* (40), where Epicurus commends those who do not suppose, when a friend predeceases them, that they should 'pity' the dead friend. That is exactly as we would expect, given the comment in *Key Doctrine* 2 that what lacks awareness is nothing to us.

But the fortieth *Doctrine*, like the second, does not bar an Epicurean from feeling concern for himself or herself at the death of a friend. What about our attitude to the friends or dependants who outlive our own deaths and will be impoverished, or harmed in some other way, by the death? *Key Doctrine 2* does not require an Epicurean to feel no concern for such people. So far as this passage is concerned, when we think about a future world devoid of ourselves, it is merely our own oblivious body and soul that are shown not to be a proper object of concern.

3b *The Letter to Menoeceus*

I have started this section with a rather extended discussion of *Key Doctrine 2* in order to avoid approaching it from the perspective of a more familiar text, the *Letter to Menoeceus*, and to block the assumption that the two texts are offering exactly the same argument.¹² In the letter, the discussion of death is longer and less focussed, and when first read its logical architecture is rather unclear, for the arguments about death and its value are interspersed with comments on incorrect attitudes to death. Two considerations help us understand the apparent disorganization of this text. First, Epicurus indicates explicitly that he is trying to foster as a ‘habit’ (124) the thought that death is nothing to us. To make the point stick, he not only repeats it but works towards it from various angles, and one starting point is common, but mistaken, ways of thinking about death. What matters is not only getting his readers back *to* this central claim but taking readers there *from* the usual apprehensions about death. Second, over the course of the letter Epicurus paints a picture of ideal moral agents – the final part of the letter (133–5) is an extended discussion of these people and their similarity to the gods – and the discussion of death allows Epicurus to add some strokes to the portrait by contrasting the ‘wise’ person’s attitude to death with ordinary ways of thinking.

We have seen Epicurus’ diagnosis of the worst fears about death. This continues to influence his discussion in this letter, but another target is the view of death as something *good*, and this provokes his harshest criticism. He quotes from the Greek poet Theognis the sentiments that it is good – Theognis wrote ‘best’ – never to be born, and that if one is born the next best thing is to die as soon as possible (126). Epicurus asks why, if the author seriously believed this, he did not act upon it and ‘take his departure

¹² Contrast e.g. Furley 1986, where Epicurus is presented as offering only one argument relating to awareness.

from life' (127). He adds that if it was offered only as mockery, it was not received in that spirit, and thus it did not achieve the social effects that were intended. So it may as well have been left unsaid. Why does Epicurus feel a need to write against this sentiment as well as against the fear of death? It is true that other authors had expressed themselves similarly to Theognis,¹³ but the ancient context is not the entire answer. Epicurus is outlining the correct attitude to death, and it involves more than the lack of fear: if one is living correctly, then life will be a source of pleasure, not a burden, and so death will not seem a positive good by comparison. By arguing against Theognis, as well as against the fear of death, he shows the blend of acceptance and non-enthusiasm with which Epicureans should anticipate their own deaths.

As in *Key Doctrine 2*, Epicurus' first argument in the *Letter* (124) uses the lack of awareness to show that death is nothing to us. Now he argues that goodness and evil depend on awareness:

Get into the habit of thinking that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil lie in awareness, and death is the deprivation of awareness.

Is his point about subjects or objects of awareness? In this passage it is not narrowly about either. His point could be expressed in terms of objects: if something is unnoticed by someone, then it is neither good nor evil for him or her. Death is thus neither good nor evil for the deceased. But it can also be expressed in terms of subjects, or rather of what has ceased to be a subject: when I cease to have awareness of any kind, then nothing at all can be good or bad for me, including my being dead.

How exactly should we understand the claim in this argument that death is nothing to us? Epicurus is referring to its lacking either goodness or evil for the person who has died – this is evident not only from the argument itself, but from the passage directly afterwards where Epicurus takes the argument to have shown that there is 'nothing fearful in not living' (125). ('Fearful' has ousted 'bad' or 'evil' because he has turned to the fears people have during life.) And 'nothing' must convey 'not good' as well, for, as we have seen, one of Epicurus' targets is the view that death is a good. A more difficult question is how narrow or broad an interpretation to apply to 'death'. Take the following two interpretations:

- (1) Being dead is neither good nor bad for the person who has died.

¹³ Compare Sophocles *Antigone* 1224–7; Herodotus 1.31.4–5.

- (2) Death itself *and* the consequences of death (for example, the fact that one no longer spends time with friends or family) are neither good nor bad for the person who has died.

On interpretation (1), the argument bars us merely from saying that it is a bad thing for the deceased *that he or she is dead*. By contrast, in the second interpretation the deprivations caused by death are themselves shown not to be bad for the deceased. The rhetorical emphasis in the passage is on death itself – ‘death, that most horrifying of evils is nothing to us’ (125) – and of course it is a maxim about death that Epicurus wants to lodge in his readers’ minds. All the same, Epicurus’ claim that the argument shows there to be ‘*nothing* fearful in not living’ suggests that he has in mind the deprivations involved in death, as well as the bare fact of being dead. And of course the argument can easily be extended to those deprivations, for the deceased person fails to notice them as well as the fact of her or his own death. Epicurus’ Roman follower Lucretius makes the closely related point that after death no *desire* remains for what used to give pleasure during life, such as getting an affectionate greeting from children (3.900–1).

This Epicurean argument has generated a debate about whether only objects of awareness are good or evil. Against Epicurus it has been argued that there are goods and evils whose value for somebody is independent of his or her noticing them.¹⁴ Consider a man who lived a full human life and excelled in some field, such as music or athletics, before suffering a severe injury that affected both body and mind, such that he no longer remembers what he used to do in concert halls or on the track. The awareness of deprivation has gone, as has the desire to regain what he has lost. We might feel that this deprivation, unnoticed by the victim if not by others, is a genuine evil for him, not only for the other people who care about him or used to enjoy his performances. If asked to defend the feeling that the victim himself is, after the accident, being harmed, we would probably argue that a life with a richer range of activities, particularly activities that both bring pleasure to others and depend on a substantial investment of time and labour, is better than a life with a smaller range, and so people are harmed if their range of activities is reduced, whether or not this is noticed by them. This familiar kind of objection is from the perspective of someone who wishes to defend the badness, not the goodness, of death; it is harder to apply to unnoticed *benefits*, as people are normally aware of the

¹⁴ See Nagel 1979 and the response of Rosenbaum 1986: 221. For good discussion in more recent scholarship, see Warren 2004: 23–34.

activities in which they engage, but Epicurus' argument takes aim at the goodness of death as well as its being bad. We can extend this line of thought to benefits if we include as beneficial, to the agent, the effects of the activities considered just above, and in particular effects that have the right fit with the agent's desires and ambitions for the world.¹⁵ For example, musicians typically want the instruments and the musical styles dear to them to flourish, and we might say that it is good for musicians with this attitude if their performances encourage others to emulate them, regardless of whether the musicians themselves know this.

How would Epicurus respond to these objections? We have to construct an answer on his behalf by looking outside the letter, for within it he simply moves on to the next part of his discussion. The closest parallel is in his discussion of the virtues, such as courage, wisdom and justice, and the corresponding vices. Some of the Epicureans' opponents, such as the Stoics, held that the virtues are intrinsically good and the vices intrinsically bad. According to the Stoics, people benefit from being virtuous even if they have not noticed becoming virtuous, and are harmed by their own moral vice even if they are unaware of it, such as when people mistakenly believe themselves to be virtuous. Are both really possible? The latter – delusions of virtue – is familiar enough, but the former might seem an implausible fantasy: how could anyone fail to notice becoming virtuous, particularly if (as in both Stoicism and Epicureanism) virtue is thought to involve wisdom? But within Stoicism we actually find the position that someone can become virtuous without realizing it. Plutarch ridicules the Stoics for suggesting it (*How to notice one's moral progress* 75e): 'who could fail to know that so great a difference had happened in him and that wisdom had flashed out all at once?'¹⁶

So some of the Epicureans' rivals were already suggesting that not all goods and evils are noticed, even if they were not using that claim against the Epicurean evaluation of death.¹⁷ And on this subject, the virtues and their value, we do have an Epicurean response, one that may go back to Epicurus himself.¹⁸ Cicero's *On Moral Ends* contains an Epicurean discussion of virtue (1.42–54), and one of the goals of that passage is to show that

¹⁵ For this 'preferentialist' conception of good and evil, see Luper 2009: 92–4.

¹⁶ See *Stoic self-contradictions* 1042e–1043a, *On Common Conceptions* 1062b; SVF 3.540 and 541.

¹⁷ Compare also Aristotle: 'both good and evil are thought to exist for the dead man, as much as they exist for the living man who is not aware of them' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1100a18–20). See Scott 2000: 214.

¹⁸ See Sedley 1998b: 148–50. For the theory of four cardinal virtues in this passage, see also Morel 2016.

the value of the virtues is purely instrumental.¹⁹ The virtues provide pleasure and prevent unnecessary pains, and those, such as the Stoics, who believe virtues to be intrinsically good misattribute the source of their value: as the spokesman for Epicureanism, Torquatus, says to his opponents (1.42), ‘if those “excellent” and “beautiful” virtues of yours did not produce pleasure, who would judge them worthy of praise or choice?’ Torquatus then runs through the standard list of virtues, showing that each virtue derives its value from either providing pleasure or diminishing pain. Courage, for example, is valuable because it removes fear, anxiety and pain from life: ‘a strong and exalted spirit is altogether free from anxiety and distress’ (1.49). A key part of courage, as conceived by an Epicurean, is losing the fear of death, and what is good is not the courageous attitude itself but losing such a powerful fear. The passage ends with an *a fortiori* argument that looks briefly to other supposed intrinsic goods (1.54): the virtues are the leading contenders for intrinsic goodness, but even they have been shown to be instrumentally, not intrinsically, good. So nothing else will challenge pleasure’s claim to be unique in possessing intrinsic goodness.

Epicurus could offer something similar in defence of his assumption, in the discussion of death, about value and awareness. He would take the unnoticed ‘harms’ or ‘benefits’ one by one and show that such value and disvalue as they have derive from their bearing on events which really are noticed and so count as goods and evils. To give just one example, the reason why it is good for a musician to inspire others to take up the instrument might be that the musician reinforces his own social and professional standing whenever he does so – and this will give rise to pleasurable opportunities for the musician in the future. The unnoticed harm envisaged above may appear more difficult for Epicurus: the objector can stipulate that the victim will never become aware of what he has lost, and that no pain or distress will occur to him as a result of the deprivation. Epicurus cannot concede that the loss of activities constitutes a harm for the victim, and here he would challenge the move from *loss of goods* to harm or evil. We are inclined to suppose that deprivations are harmful, but that – he would argue – is only because they typically give rise to pain or distress. But when they fail to cause pain, he would say, deprivations are not bad at

¹⁹ Annas 1993: 339–43 gives a different account of Epicurean ethics where virtue does not have merely instrumental value. But then Epicurus’ expressions would be not merely ‘shocking’, as she suggests (341), but extremely misleading, particularly the following: ‘we should honour the noble and the virtues and the like if they give pleasure – but otherwise we should say goodbye to them’ (Athenaeus 546f).

all. Epicurus would suggest, then, that we are in the grip of the usual connection between deprivation and pain when we suppose, falsely, that even an unnoticed deprivation is an evil.

In the letter, Epicurus does not offer any defence of his claim about value and awareness. Instead, he shows how his conclusion about the ‘nothingness’ of death bears on questions about life: whether we can enjoy living as mortals and whether during life we should fear death. The swiftness with which he turns to life should not be surprising, given that the letter as a whole aims to show how someone can ‘live as a god among human beings’ (135). The passage is marked by rhetorical flourishes, such as carefully balanced antithesis, and Epicurus allows himself some exaggeration, such as when he says that there is ‘nothing fearful’ in life for someone who correctly grasps that there is ‘nothing fearful’ in death – that assumes that we fear only the events and conditions that might prove fatal, and so that soothing concerns about death will help us face everything we might encounter during life. But of course we may fear non-terminal illnesses and pains. In what follows I will focus on his comments on immortality, duration and fear.

Epicurus draws attention to the particular way in which he has reconciled his reader to the fact that human life, unlike that of the gods, has an ending. He has not added infinite time,²⁰ but removed the desire for immortality (124). No rival philosopher is named, but he clearly has in mind a different way of making death ‘nothing to us’: the denial, presumably in Plato above all, that death is the end of us. (He speaks of ‘the correct understanding that death is nothing to us’, which suggests that other people have offered incorrect versions.) His boast about immortality seems premature: regarding death as an evil is not, we might object, the only reason to desire immortality, and so some of his readers may still regard immortality as preferable to existence that ends at death. A range of reasons can be imagined. Plato’s Socrates desires the understanding that eludes people during life, and so he has reason to desire continued existence after death, if not immortality. Against this, Epicurus would reply that full understanding, for example, of goodness and evil, can be achieved during life – and so he has good reason to describe the person ready for death as ‘wise’, not merely a ‘philosopher’, which in Greek suggests having a desire for wisdom. But we might imagine a less philosophical person with a different concern: he does not desire to reach some as yet unfulfilled condition, such as wisdom, but simply wants to go on forever doing the

²⁰ This assumes the emendation of the text from ἀπὸρον to ἀπείρον.

range of things he enjoys – and that desire comes not from a view of death as evil but directly from his attachment to those activities, and, as often as not, to the people with whom they are shared. (This kind of desire would thus be satisfied only by shared immortality, not by the individual's own immortality alone.) Epicurus is not yet entitled to say that he has removed this kind of desire.

Epicurus thinks he has an answer to that objection too, and later in the passage he gestures towards it: the wise person enjoys not the longest time but the time that offers the most pleasure (126). There is a comparison with food: the wise person chooses not simply to maximize his intake of food but rather to enjoy the most pleasant food. This leaves it unclear what it would take to satisfy the wise person: would a brief period – a day or even an hour or a minute – of pure pleasure suffice and make him ready for death? Or is a longer (but of course finite) period needed? The analogy with food suggests that some duration is necessary for a good life – nobody, however refined, could survive without a certain quantity of food. But that is merely an analogy, and it may be wrong to infer anything from it besides the contrast between pleasure and duration. Another passage from the letter that bears on the question is his claim that living well and dying well require the same preparation (126). If this is not another exaggeration, then preparing for death must require more than reflections on death itself – it must also require the person to have become good at leading his or her life. That is, he or she must have become adept at making choices and have attained the understanding of desires and value that enables an Epicurean life. On this view, someone is ready for death only when ready to lead a full Epicurean life. But does someone need then to *live* that life for a certain period? If we take Epicurus at his word, it looks as if that is unnecessary, for if the good life and the good death require exactly the same preparation, then someone who has become ready to live is thereupon ready to die. In short, the letter does not resolve these questions about value and time. Epicurus touches on them elsewhere (*Key Doctrines* 18–20), and he is clearer about our not needing infinite time than he is about the duration that is needed – or about the specific question of a life cut short precisely at the point where the person became ready, by Epicurus' standards, to live well. These questions were taken up and discussed more fully by the later Epicurean Philodemus, and so the right time to address them is when we consider his *On Death* later in the chapter.²¹

²¹ Compare Tsouna 2007: 67. For further discussion, see Warren 2004: 124–53.

Before we turn to other Epicurean texts, let us finally consider what Epicurus says about fear and the time of harm. What of people whose reason for fearing death is not that it will be painful or distressing to be dead, but that death causes pain or distress in anticipation (125)? Epicurus' response is to treat this very literally as a fear, and to ask what it would mean to *fear* something in this way: not regarding the outcome as painful or otherwise evil, but merely being distressed by the thought of it. It is hard not to agree with him that this would be an 'empty' fear.²² But we might conclude from it that some of our negative attitudes to death are not best described as kinds of fear: for example, on considering our mortality and our cherished activities, we might wish things were otherwise, which is not quite the same thing as *fearing* the state of being dead. Similarly, it would be strange to 'fear' the destruction of planet Earth, if it will take place many years after our death, but some of us may wish all the same that the planet and human society could carry on forever.²³ By contrast, Epicurus assumes that something not yet 'present' could be 'something' – in this case, a genuine evil – for people only if it is a proper object of fear for them. This is in keeping with the way in which the future tends to figure in his ethics. For example, the prospect of punishment plays an important part in his defence of justice, and the punishment awaiting a condemned criminal, although not yet 'present', is a proper object of fear for the criminal, for when it happens it will be unpleasant.

Epicurus has now argued that death is neither an evil to the dead nor a proper object of fear for the living. His own overview is rather different and draws attention to the simple fact that death is not yet 'present' for the living: 'the most horrifying of evils, death, is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist' (125). Epicurus also shifts here from the non-awareness of the dead to their non-existence. Logically, he could have divided time into the periods where people do and do not have *awareness* and shown that death is 'nothing' in both periods. But he may think that people are more inclined to divide time into periods of their existence and non-existence, and so he works with the grain of his readers' thinking to take them from that exhaustive division of time to the nothingness of death.

Epicurus is posing a serious difficulty for those who would defend the badness of death: at what time does death harm people? (The division of time would apply also to the claim that death *benefits* people, but at this

²² For emptiness in belief and emotion, see Annas 1992: 193–9.

²³ See Scheffler and Kolodny 2013.

point he is targeting the view of death as an evil.) Death cannot harm until it has occurred, but after death there is no person to be harmed, and, to quote Phillip Mitsis, ‘we normally think that something must exist for it to be the subject of a harm such as deprivation’.²⁴ So there is no time at which death harms. The challenge requires death to be distinguished from our thoughts and concerns about it, which, he would have to concede, can cause harm during our lives, however irrational he may judge them. If Epicurus’ critics are to resist the challenge, they must either justify locating the harm at some time, while the person is alive and/or afterwards, or find some way of neutralizing the demand to name a time.²⁵ One way of neutralizing the demand is through a comparativist account of the evil. On this version, in calling death an evil we are not looking to the state of being dead and suggesting that the deceased person is at that time being harmed; rather we are comparing the life the person actually lived with a different possible life, longer and with further pleasures. The harmfulness of death can be measured by the difference in value between the two lives, and there is not a specific time at which, or from which, they differ in value. We are, so to speak, comparing lives as wholes.²⁶ In making the comparison we have moved from considering the harmfulness of being dead to the harmfulness of someone’s dying at a particular time: for example, my death in, say, 2060 prevents me from enjoying pleasures that I would otherwise have enjoyed in 2061 or 2062. But it seems legitimate to use thoughts about the timing of death against a philosopher who aims to reconcile people to the ‘mortality of life’ (*Letter to Menoeceus* 124).

4 Philodemus

In recent scholarship on Epicureanism, greater attention has been given to the surviving portions of Philodemus’ *On Death*, the remnants of Book 4,²⁷ although contemporary philosophers writing about death still tend to consult only Epicurus and Lucretius as representatives of Epicureanism. Despite its fragmentary character, Philodemus’ writing on death is an

²⁴ Mitsis 1993: 807.

²⁵ For a full survey of the options, see Luper 2009, chapter 6. Hawley 2014 argues that the qualities of a person can be partly determined by what happens at places and times from which he or she is absent – for example, someone else’s height makes a small difference to how my own height compares to the average – and extends the point to posthumous harm and benefit. See also Feldman 1992: 152–4; Warren 2004: 23–34.

²⁶ Luper 2009: 125.

²⁷ *PHerc.* 1050. Henry 2009 provides the Greek text and an English translation. There is now a very full and valuable treatment by Tsouna 2007, chapter 10.

attractive alternative to the *Letter to Menoeceus*. One reason is that Philodemus is more specific about what it means for an Epicurean life to be complete; another is that he considers, with sensitivity and discrimination, a much wider range of fears and concerns relating to death. Whereas Epicurus focusses on the fears that the *Letter to Herodotus* diagnosed as most severe, Philodemus takes various fears in turn and argues whether each of them is, to some degree, appropriate.²⁸ Philodemus very obviously recognizes that there is more than one kind of fear or concern that the prospect of death can cause; indeed, he takes this as his starting point, and considers which of them should feature in a good life. Often, as we would expect, his argument turns on the points that after death people lack any awareness and cease to exist. Some people seek a glorious death that will impress later generations, but, he says, that is ‘nothing to one who will not have awareness nor exist at all’ (28.32–6). It is foolish to worry about enemies rejoicing over you when you are dead, for then you will be completely obliterated and unaware of their malicious glee (20.3–7).²⁹ We might expect him then to dismiss *all* fears or concerns about events after death, for in all these cases these points about non-awareness and non-existence will apply. But, as we will see, Philodemus suggests that one such concern is appropriate and will be experienced even by the most admirable people: the concern that when we are dead those whom we love will be harmed by our death.

Philodemus’ writing illustrates the range of styles and registers – sometimes sympathetic, sometimes severe – that Epicurean therapy can involve. He concedes that some fears or concerns are ‘natural’ and that a sensible person is susceptible to them, before showing how they can best be minimized. But at other times he sharply distinguishes between a sensible person and the foolish. One of the most famous passages is his description of the sensible person, now in possession of all he needs for a happy life, ‘going around ready for burial and profiting from one day as if it were eternity’ (38.17–18). This person’s readiness for death is contrasted with those who even in old age are unmindful of their own mortality and even prevent themselves from thinking about it (38.25–7, 39.8–9). As in Epicurus’ description of the right attitude to death, Philodemus does not

²⁸ Near the end of the text, Philodemus suggests that there is no need to deal comprehensively with people’s concerns and that he has written specifically about the concerns that cause the most distress (37.13–17). The greater range of his discussion, when compared with that of Epicurus, is nonetheless striking.

²⁹ Compare 30.7–17, 32.2–9.

suggest that the sensible person feels any desire for death. Each new day is enjoyed in full awareness of the fact that one is mortal.

One source of concern neglected by Epicurus is the process of dying and its painfulness. Notoriously Epicurus claimed that no pain is both long lasting and severe (*Letter to Menoeceus* 133, *Key Doctrine* 4), but, as we have seen, he does not need this utterly implausible view in order to justify his decision to say comparatively little about a life ending in pain. On his diagnosis, people have the strongest fear for what lasts forever, and so it is reasonable for him to focus on what comes next – the unending state of being dead. Philodemus, by contrast, does discuss the process of dying and its painfulness.³⁰ Here the dialectical context is important, for it explains his reliance – not typical of what survives of *On Death* – on narrowly Epicurean theory. Philodemus is not denying that dying *can* be painful.³¹ According to his opponent, the third-century Stoic Apollophanes, Epicurus' theory of the soul entails that dying is necessarily very painful. When Epicurus explains why the soul and the body depend on each other for sensation and, more generally, awareness, he describes their intimate interconnection and 'co-affection' (*Letter to Herodotus* 64). Apollophanes argued that, if Epicurus is right, such a close 'co-affection' could not be ended without extreme pain. It would be awkward for the Epicureans if their own theory of soul gave them special reason to fear the process of dying, and Philodemus responds by reminding his opponent of other parts of the Epicurean theory of soul: the soul's constituent atoms make it especially mobile and easily able to escape through the 'pores' in the body.³² So the connection between the soul and the body can be ended with only a minor or gentle change, such as would not bring about any pain at all (7.8–8.19).

Elsewhere Philodemus' writing is less partisan and shows little sign of inter-school polemic.³³ A topic discussed by Stoics as well as Epicureans was the emotions to which all people, even the virtuous, are susceptible.

³⁰ A work attributed to Demetrius of Laconia (*P.Herc.* 1013 col.18) notes that people fear either the state of being dead or dying painfully: 'dying is fearful either because of what comes after it, namely, being dead, or because of what accompanies it, namely, the *pain* that accompanies dying.' Consult Romeo 1979 for the Greek text. For Cicero's version, see *Tusculan Disputations* 1.82.

³¹ For a different reconstruction, see Tsouna 2007: 265–9. According to Tsouna, Philodemus is responding to the suggestion that the process of dying can be painful. But, as she notes, Philodemus does not deny that; all he shows is that it can be free of pain, given the special atomic constitution of the soul. So it is more charitable to Philodemus to assume that his opponents are making a different claim: the Epicurean theory of soul entails that the process is *necessarily* painful.

³² See Lucretius 3.177–230 and the ancient comment preserved in *Letter to Herodotus* 66.

³³ See Armstrong 2004.

Stoics spoke of ‘bites’ or ‘pangs’, which even the wise person may experience, but in Stoicism these are not passions, for while a passion involves – or, more accurately, is – a false judgement (for example, a fear may involve the judgement that my impending death is an evil for me), bites or pangs do not involve such beliefs or judgements.³⁴ The category of ‘bites’ and ‘pangs’ thus permits the Stoics to acknowledge that the wise person has some involuntary responses without claiming that he or she experiences a genuine emotion. Philodemus similarly writes about the emotional ‘bites’ of the wise and virtuous, but in his writing these seem to mark full emotions, for they do involve judgements.³⁵ A ‘bite’ or ‘pang’ is simply a less severe emotion, such as a pang of concern that is less severe than the emotion of distress: ‘only such as to cause a pang, not to confer distress, or even great distress’ (26.3–5). Pangs form an important category when he discusses the emotional responses to death that even a good or sensible person would feel.

The pang to which a good person will be most vulnerable concerns the future of those who will outlive him: ‘leaving behind parents, children, a wife or some other people close to us, who will be in misfortune because of our death, or will even lack what they need – this of course has a most natural pang, and it alone, or above all, stirs up weeping in the sensible man’ (25.2–10). Philodemus says explicitly that this will be only a pang, not intense distress (25.12–13). What does he mean when he calls it ‘most natural’? Part of his meaning seems to be that the pang is *inevitable*, or at least is inevitable for such a person in these circumstances – that is, when a good person believes that those whom he loves will face a miserable future after his death. (As we will see shortly, the term ‘natural’ also has a normative aspect.) In his writing on anger, the ‘natural’ kind of the emotion is said to be unavoidable for ‘human nature’ (*On Anger* 40.19–22).³⁶ In this passage of *On Death*, the subsequent remarks suggest that ‘natural’ means or implies ‘inevitable’ (25.28–30): he adds that you should address the pang by appointing attentive guardians for the survivors about whom you feel the pang. So the wise person seeks to remove the pang by removing the grounds for the relevant belief: he makes provision in such

³⁴ See Sorabji 2000: 38 and 70–71; Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 3.82–3, Seneca *on Anger* 2.2.5. For ‘bites’ in Stoic emotions, see also Galen *On the doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 2.8.4, 2.8.18, 4.3.2.

³⁵ See Tsouna 2007: 46–8; Armstrong 2008: 106; *On Anger* 41.29–31.

³⁶ Before Philodemus, the Epicurean Demetrius of Laconia had distinguished between four meanings of ‘natural’: (1) produced by ‘uncorrupted’ instinct; (2) inevitable (the example given by Demetrius is our natural susceptibility to pain); (3) advantageous; and (4) corresponding directly to external reality. See Armstrong 2008: 83.

a way that there is no longer reason to believe that there will be a miserable future for, say, his children. It would be surprising to suggest this if Philodemus thought it possible for the good person, simply by reflecting on his own lack of awareness after death, to remove this pang altogether *without* making any provision for loved ones.³⁷

Philodemus thus suggests that there are negative emotions that even, or perhaps especially, the sensible person cannot help but feel in some circumstances. The appropriate response, on recognizing this, is practical: make provisions so that you and those you love are no longer in these circumstances. In this particular case, the pang of concern is natural not by being innate but as an inevitable concomitant of the friendships and other close relationships – with parents, children and so on – that a good life includes, in circumstances where those loved people will be vulnerable without the person living that life. The practicality of the solution sets it apart from the therapy we have seen so far in Epicurus' letters; another difference is that in Epicurus there seemed to be no concerns or worries that are, in the sense relevant here, inevitable. All the same, it is most unlikely that Philodemus saw himself as contradicting anything in Epicurus' teaching. Epicurus had suggested that the wise man is particularly susceptible to certain emotions (Diogenes Laertius 10.117); this may have spurred later Epicureans to think of specific cases where this would be true, and relationships involving love and care are an obvious place to explore it.³⁸ Epicurus' own will may have been another stimulus. His will would have been known to later Epicureans – it is preserved in Diogenes Laertius (16–21), and Epicurus made it unusually public, for we learn from the will itself that a bequest containing some of his provisions was stored in the public records of the Athenian Metroon. Epicurus' will aimed to ensure the future of the Epicurean community and the welfare of the children of Metrodorus, a philosophical colleague who had predeceased him. Cicero uses the will in his critique of Epicurean ethics, asking why Epicurus took such care in making provision for a time when, according to Epicurus' own doctrine, he has lost all sensation (*On Moral Ends* 2.101–3). But Epicurus' successors may also have asked themselves – of course in a far more

³⁷ Philodemus closes the discussion on a harsher note: 'if not, it is foolish to mourn the suffering of others when one has escaped one's own suffering' (25.34–37). But it is hard to see to whom this applies, and what is being denied by 'if not'. He has just described people who endure someone else's death 'more nobly'. Perhaps then 'if not' means 'if he has failed to prepare his loved ones for his own death'. Or perhaps it means 'if one is not a sensible person', and so marks a form of self-consolation available specifically for the foolish. Compare Henry 2009: 59 n.97.

³⁸ Anger that recognizes moral reality is another. Compare Philodemus *On Anger* 49.19–26.

sympathetic spirit – what motivated Epicurus to write such a will. Philodemus’ discussion of the pang of concern for surviving loved ones may thus reflect discussion between Epicureans about Epicurus’ personal attitude to the children and colleagues for whom his will made provision.³⁹

We have also seen that Epicurus’ second *Key Doctrine* does not bar this sort of concern for other people who survive one’s death. The tension is rather between (1) the altruism apparently contained in the pang and (2) Epicurus’ moral psychology, according to which people should refer all their actions to their own pleasures and pains (*Key Doctrine* 25). Notice that the practical response to the pang is not itself altruistic. Suppose I know that I am inevitably bound to feel a pang of concern for my children if I make no provision for them. It is then in my own interests to make arrangements for them and so spare myself that pang. But the pang itself – the concern that after my death my children, say, will be impoverished or otherwise harmed – cannot be so explained, as after death I will be oblivious to their suffering. Perhaps the pang reflects a false belief and so is something that it would be better for me, if possible, to lose. But that is unlikely. According to Philodemus, the pang is characteristic of the good or ‘sensible’ person (25.9–10), which suggests that it *should* be felt in the relevant circumstances. The label ‘natural’ also suggests that the belief involved in the pang is not false.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Philodemus distinguishes between ‘natural’ anger and ‘empty’ anger; whereas empty anger depends on a false belief, natural anger depends on correct beliefs: ‘it comes together from perceiving how the nature of things really is and holding no false beliefs in one’s comparison of the damage with the punishment of those who inflict the harm’ (*On Anger* 37.32–39).⁴¹ The distinction is probably intended to recall Epicurus’ distinction between ‘natural’ desires and those based on ‘empty’ opinion (*Key Doctrine* 29).⁴² We know from Cicero that there were various Epicurean accounts of friendship, one of which seems to allow for a genuinely altruistic attitude to develop (Cicero *On Moral Ends*

³⁹ The will and Philodemus’ text use the same Greek verb for ‘taking care’ of others (Diogenes Laertius 10.19; Philodemus 25.29–30). The letter to Idomeneus, written by Epicurus on his deathbed, is also relevant, as here Epicurus instructs Idomeneus to ‘take care’ of Metrodorus’ children (Diogenes Laertius 10.22).

⁴⁰ For a synopsis of Philodemus’ uses of ‘natural’ when describing emotions, see Tsouna 2007: 224–5.

⁴¹ Strictly speaking, Philodemus is explaining why the anger is good, not natural, but he soon makes it clear that he is describing ‘natural’, ‘biting’ anger (38.5–7). See Tsouna 2007: 41. Compare the fourth of Demetrius’ definitions of ‘natural’ in n.36 above.

⁴² Elsewhere in the treatise, Philodemus uses ‘naturally’ in the sense of ‘rightly’ or ‘justifiably’ (20.8).

1.65–70, especially 69), and so this passage may show that Philodemus' own view of friendship and family ties has such an altruistic dimension.⁴³

I have suggested that Epicurus' will may have prompted later Epicureans to consider the appropriate attitude to the family and friends who will be left behind after death. It is likely that Philodemus also has his eye on ancient literature, such as Homer's *Iliad*, where Hector imagines what may become of his family – his parents, brothers and above all his wife – after his death and describes how that imagined future concerns him (6.441–65).⁴⁴ In other parts of *On Death* 4, Philodemus quotes Homer when describing the various objects of fear, such as dying at sea (33.10–14) or dying in bed rather than in the middle of some valiant act of war (28.3–4).⁴⁵ This suggests that Philodemus drew on his knowledge of Homer – he also wrote a work on Homer's representation of kingship – in order to broaden Epicurean discussions of death beyond the therapy already offered by Epicurus. That in turn may explain why he spends so little of the treatise arguing against other schools and the therapy or consolation that they offer, such as the Platonic promise of immortality: his priority, at least in the remaining parts of the work, is to do justice to a wider range of fears and concerns that the prospect of death can cause, and to consider which of them deserves a place in the good life. Expressions of distress and anxiety in literature may have more to offer such a project than the writings of rival philosophers.

Another pang for which Philodemus shows sympathy concerns premature death. He has in mind someone who is capable of making progress in philosophy but is being 'snatched away' by death. It is 'natural' for this person too to feel a pang (17.32–6). But Philodemus then adds what else can be said of such a life: if a person is genuinely capable of attaining the best life, then he will be stabilized – Philodemus uses a word meaning 'ballasted' – even at such a time by pleasures (18.1–8). If a person really has this aptitude, then his or her life will necessarily involve pleasures 'worth mentioning', if not the pleasures that come from philosophy. Better still, if the person has actually started his philosophical education and derived pleasures from that, then he will already have a 'wonderful good' to send him on his way with exultation (18.5–9). All the same, 'it is much better for

⁴³ Here I take a different view of the passage in Cicero from that of Frede 2016: 106–8. In my view, Frede overemphasizes the comparison with affection for places, pets and so on, which is merely (as she notes) part of an *a fortiori* argument.

⁴⁴ More exactly, Hector describes what will happen after the capture of Troy. He wishes to be dead and buried before he hears of his wife's suffering (6.464–5).

⁴⁵ The Homeric passages are *Odyssey* 5.306–12 (Odysseus) and *Iliad* 22.305 (Hector).

a young man to advance in wisdom and be increased with it in a manner worthy of his nature' (18.9–11), and presumably it is this correct judgement, together with awareness of an imminent death, that causes the 'pang' in the person facing death. Philodemus does not pursue the implications of this claim about what is 'much better', and they seem troubling for Epicurus' own arguments against death. Suppose we assume that an event that denies one something better is an evil. Then death – or rather dying at this time instead of a later time – is an evil for such a young man, regardless of whether he is aware of it. This comparativist account of good and evil does not sit comfortably with Epicurus' assumption that a harm must be noticed (see pp. 127–31 above).

For this person, a longer life would have been better. But Philodemus indicates that truncated philosophical progress is a special case ('let us say *specifically* . . . ' (17.32–3)) and does not apply to all deaths at a young age. Other lives reach a point where they cannot be improved by prolonging them, and this may happen surprisingly early, as in the case of Pythocles, a student of Epicurus glowingly praised by him while still a teenager (Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1124c).⁴⁶ Philodemus uses the contrast between Pythocles and an old man who has enjoyed nothing good to show that a life should not be measured simply by its duration (12.31–13.13). The stark distinction between the wise and the foolish now re-emerges: 'the foolish man will not gain a noteworthy good even if he lives as long as Tithonus' (19.33–35). Other discussions of duration and death strike a note more familiar to readers of Epicurus. He repeats Epicurus' claims (*Key Doctrines* 19, 20) that an infinite period of life is not needed (3.32–39), and says that a finite period is enough to secure the greatest goods (13.3–5). So no life is incomplete simply by having a finite duration. But here too he adds to what we find in Epicurus: unlike Epicurus, he specifies that some duration is needed after one has attained full Epicurean understanding: 'the greatest good has been received by one who has become wise *and lived on for some time*' (19.1–3). A life becomes complete only after one has lived some time in this condition.

At first sight, the following passage makes the same point: 'it is characteristic of the sensible person to wish to live on for some time, both (i) so that he may satisfy his congenital and natural desires, and (ii) so that he may receive in full the most fitting way of life that he can attain, and as a result be filled with good things, become at peace and cast off all

⁴⁶ Sedley discusses Pythocles' life (1976: 43–6). As Sedley shows, the evidence does not entail that Pythocles himself died in his late teens.

disturbance to do with desires' (14.2–10). But this is about someone who has not yet 'cast off' disturbance and who has not attained the best kind of life 'in full'. So the passage does not show that a person who is already living the best life must then live on for a certain time if his or her death is not to be premature. Philodemus is considering a different question: the relationship between 'natural' desires and the wish to live longer. Each of us, even the wisest, has natural desires, such as the desire for food, and nobody loses those desires when the 'most fitting way of life' is attained. And the sensible person who has not yet attained that life retains his natural desires, and wishes to live longer in order to satisfy them.⁴⁷ This point ((i) in the quotation) might suggest a life that never becomes complete. So Philodemus' emphasis is on (ii): the sensible person also wants to live in such a way that he is no longer 'disturbed' by desires. This kind of disturbance, unlike the desires themselves, can be discarded during life – for example, one can cease to be troubled by anxiety that the basic need for food and drink will not be satisfied. The sensible person's resolve to live long enough to reach that condition will not become a yearning for immortality.

We have seen Philodemus showing understanding for anxiety in specific cases. Other kinds, or 'parts', of concern receive no sympathy. 'The part concerning our enemies rejoicing over us is unforgivably foolish' (20.3–5). As we would expect, Philodemus points out that the dead person will be unaware of his enemies' glee (20.5–11).⁴⁸ We might think that is all that needs to be said from an Epicurean perspective, but he does not end there. He argues that there are only certain people whose enmity should cause distress – presumably these are people with good judgement – and they will not hate a good person, at least if they recognize his or her goodness (20.11–14). There is a similarly redundant argument, we may suppose, when he turns to childless people anxious that their name and reputation will not be preserved (22.9–13), another anxiety dismissed as 'foolish'. Here too the only point he needs, we might think, is that after death they will be

⁴⁷ On the face of it, this is surprising, at least when applied to food and drink. We might think that people desire food and drink in order to survive, not that they desire to survive in order to satisfy their hunger or thirst. Probably his wording here is influenced by the thought that in someone less sensible the wish to satisfy natural desires could become a yearning for immortality. The surviving Greek wording (μέγ ... δ', 14.2, 14.10) strongly suggests that Philodemus went on to offer a contrasting description of the foolish.

⁴⁸ We might object that the enemies will still feel the pleasure. But the point is not to deny the enemies malicious pleasure, but to spare ourselves the pain of noticing it and suffering further consequences: 'a mocking enemy causes disturbance naturally when he does it to people who notice, and when bad things result from it for the people rejoiced over' (20.7–11).

unaware of their reputation, and it looks as if he wrote exactly that, although the text is incomplete (20.30–31). But he adds that children are not the only means of securing posthumous recognition: that is shown not only by Epicurus himself, whose memory was preserved by his philosophical successors, but also by ordinary people who are honoured by affectionate friends (23.2–15).

What is gained from these additional arguments? One explanation is that Philodemus is writing for a varied readership and is prepared to meet them halfway, as it were, by conceding more to their concerns than Epicureanism strictly allows.⁴⁹ But even at his most dialectical, Philodemus wishes to challenge his readership: if they are committed to avoiding hostile mockery, then it – or at least the form of it that should cause distress – can be avoided by becoming virtuous; obscurity can be avoided by cultivating friendships, even if one is not as memorable as the great Epicurus. That makes it sound as if he wishes to make moralizing points that apply during life as well as after death. Philodemus confirms precisely that when he later imagines the lack of burial and the concern that other people will regard someone as wretched if he or she is unburied, yet another topic where it might seem sufficient to mention the lack of awareness after death. ‘Nobody reasonable attaches such a thing [i.e. it is unreasonable to ‘attach’ the judgement that the unburied person is wretched], and as for those who do, no attention should be paid to them *even in life*, not to mention in the time when we are unaware of them and do not exist at all’ (32.11–15). The moralizing strand in Philodemus’ writing about death applies Epicurus’ maxim that dying well requires the same preparation as living well (*Letter to Menoeceus* 126).

5 Comparisons between Times

A distress dismissed as ‘foolish’ by Philodemus is caused by the prospect of dying childless (22.9–12). The form of distress he has in mind relates not to a life without children but rather to a posthumous future without children and other descendants: the thought is not ‘my life would have been better if I had had children’ but ‘when I am dead nobody will bear my name, and nobody will remember or honour me as an ancestor’ (22.12–13, 23.8–11). As we would expect, part of Philodemus’ response is to show that after death the person will have no awareness (22.30–31). But later he draws the following comparison between the future and the past (23.35–24.5):

⁴⁹ Compare Armstrong 2004.

In short, I say that whether descendants have been left or not, and whether the acts mentioned before are performed by descendants, by people unrelated to us or simply by nobody, will be no more to us than it was at the time of Phoroneus and his contemporaries.

According to one legend, Phoroneus, not Prometheus, first taught people to use fire.⁵⁰ Back in his day we were completely unaffected by the fact that nobody bore our name or remembered us with respect (the ‘acts mentioned before’ are presumably ways of honouring people). After our death we will be just as unaffected if our name is extinguished and we become forgotten. Given that Philodemus introduces this comparison as a recapitulation (‘in short . . .’), he evidently believes that the point it conveys is not wholly new but summarizes something he has already said. I suggest that this is the point about the lack of awareness: the comparison with the time far before our birth brings home our complete unawareness, after death, of the names and actions of the living, and their connection or lack of connection to us.⁵¹ In this regard, our condition after death will be no different from our condition long before birth.

A different interpretation would be to take the passage to refer to our attitudes, during our lives, to the world before birth and after death. It is hard to imagine what it would be like for someone to take exactly the same attitude to (1) lacking ‘descendants’ and not being honoured before his or her birth and (2) lacking descendants and not being honoured after death. The components of (1) are necessarily true, or at least, in the case of being honoured, are impossible for the person in question to bring about (some forms of provision made for people before their birth could conceivably be described as a way of ‘honouring them’). By contrast, thinking about (2), at least in adulthood, will inevitably make someone examine choices he or she has taken during life and form some evaluation of them. An attitude to (2) will thus involve some evaluative attitude to further aspects of life, whereas an attitude to (1), if it is considered at all, need not. And in Philodemus’ text neither of the compared items is an attitude held during life: instead, they are two times in which we lack attitudes or awareness of any kind. This is clear when he comments on the future: having or lacking

⁵⁰ Pausanias 2.19.5. See also 2.15.5.

⁵¹ According to other scholars, Philodemus’ comparison is between two groups of people: his readership (‘us’) and Phoroneus’ contemporaries. Our lack of descendants and posthumous honour will be no more to us than the lack of descendants and posthumous honour was (or maybe is or will be) to Phoroneus’ contemporaries. See Henry 2009: 55 n.90; Tsouna 2007: 283. But in the Greek, Philodemus switches from *πρὸς τοὺς κατὰ*, whereas if he were comparing what the lack of descendants is ‘to us’ with what it is ‘to them’, he should have stuck with *πρὸς*. For *κατὰ* in the sense of ‘in the time of’, see LSJ s.v. B VII.

descendants, and so on, 'will be' nothing to us. (In the comment on the distant past, 'it was' is not present in the Greek and needs to be supplied.) We might conclude then that the passage has nothing to do with the attitudes we hold during life. But that cannot be right either, for Philodemus is offering these remarks to reduce or eliminate the distress experienced – of course during life – by childless people, and so he intends the comparison to *affect* attitudes. The comparison is intended to help people face without distress a future in which nobody will bear their name or honour them as an ancestor.

Recently there has been a debate about whether comparative arguments of this kind concern attitudes held during life.⁵² When considering that question, we must distinguish between the intended outcome of the argument and the items that are compared with one another. Often the context strongly suggests that the argument is intended to change attitudes held during life, such as when the author promises that he will relieve his readers of fear. But it does not follow that the comparison used to bring about that outcome must itself be between the attitudes held by living people. In the passage above, Philodemus compares two times in which the person in question does not exist, and so cannot have an attitude to the people alive in the world and their actions. What then is the connection between that comparison and our attitudes? Philodemus assumes that it is irrational to be distressed by the lack of honour and descendants after death if we will, at that future time, be unaware of them; he further assumes that by pointing out the irrationality of the distress he will reduce his readers' susceptibility to it. We might compare Epicurus' claim 'that which produces no disturbance when present causes an empty distress when anticipated' (*Letter to Menoeceus* 125).⁵³ As we have seen, this claim does not sit easily with what Philodemus says about the pang of concern felt for those who outlive us, where he endorses concern towards a future event that will, when it occurs, cause no 'disturbance' to the person currently experiencing

⁵² See above all Warren 2004, chapter 3, but also Warren 2014. Warren draws a contrast between two versions of a Symmetry argument concerning the person's own non-existence before birth and after death (2004: 62). Version 1 compares what prenatal non-existence *was* to us with what non-existence *will be* to us; version 2 compares what prenatal non-existence *is* to the living person with what non-existence after death *is* to him or her. Although Warren does not consider this passage of Philodemus, he provides a valuable survey of ancient Symmetry arguments (2004: 68–75; compare Rosenbaum 1989: 354 n.5). His survey shows that 'ancient examples of an argument concerning the symmetry or asymmetry of prospective and retrospective attitudes to past and future non-existence are extremely rare' (2004: 74).

⁵³ Compare Warren 2004: 100–101, which quotes exactly this passage to complete Lucretius' Symmetry argument.

distress. If Philodemus had in mind Epicurus' claim about 'empty distress', he must have taken Epicurus to mean that when people feel distress *on their own account*, such as when they worry that after death they will be forgotten by others, the distress is 'empty' if its object will, when realized, cause them no distress.⁵⁴

Lucretius offers a far more famous argument – the so-called Symmetry argument – comparing the times before birth and after death (3.830–42), and it is this Lucretian argument that prompted the debate about whether such arguments are concerned with attitudes held during life. Lucretius has just given a series of arguments for the mortality of the soul, and now considers the lack of awareness and existence after death.

Therefore death is nothing to us and does not affect us at all, since it has been established that the mind's nature is mortal. And as in the past we felt no dismay when the Carthaginians were approaching from all sides for the fight, when the world, struck with the terrifying chaos of war, trembled with a shudder under the lofty air of heaven, and was unsure to whose rule all humanity would fall on earth and sea, so, when we will not exist, when body and soul, from which we are joined as one, have been parted, evidently nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who will not exist then, and stir our senses – not even if earth be mixed with sea and sea with sky.

As Warren has shown (2004: 64–5), the tenses of the Latin verbs make it clear that this argument compares our condition in the remote past, when we 'felt' no dismay, with our condition after our deaths, when nothing '*will* be able to happen to us ... and stir our senses'.⁵⁵ Like Philodemus, Lucretius is not comparing the retrospective and prospective attitudes of living people, and yet he too is aiming to change attitudes: when setting the agenda for this part of his poem he promises to dispel the fear of death (3.37–40, 91–3). The connection between the comparison and our attitudes is the same as in Philodemus: Lucretius too assumes that it is rational to fear events such as the end of the world only if, at the time, they will 'stir our senses'. By reflecting on their condition before birth, his readers will see how utterly incapable they will be of noticing even such cataclysmic events.

⁵⁴ The following comment by Philodemus seems closer to Epicurus' sentiment: 'if not, it is foolish to mourn the suffering of others when one has escaped one's own suffering' (25.34–37). But see n.37 above.

⁵⁵ Compare Furley 1986: 76 (emphasis original): 'Lucretius does not argue here from the observation that we are not *now* concerned about what happened in the Punic Wars to the claim that we should not *now* be concerned about anything that may happen after our death. He argues that we felt no pain in the past, when the Carthaginians came: so we shall feel no pain in the future when we are dead. The tenses of the verbs are conclusive about this; there is no statement at all about our present emotions.'

As Lucretius says in a later restatement of his argument, nature has given us a ‘mirror’ with which to get a look at our condition after death, namely, the period before birth, which was at the time nothing to us (3.972–77).⁵⁶

Lucretius’ discussion of death opens with Epicurus’ famous statement that death is nothing to us. That might suggest that his Symmetry argument should be interpreted as an attempt to show purely that being dead, or the fact of our deaths, will be nothing to us.⁵⁷ In fact, however, Lucretius is being more ambitious: after we are dead, he says, anything that occurs will be nothing to us. So the ‘and’ (*et*) with which he turns to the Symmetry argument (‘and as in the past’) marks a genuine addition: he goes on from the nothingness of death itself, stated in the opening words, to the inability of anything at all, even the end of the world, to affect the dead. What then of the pang of concern for the loved ones who outlive us? Philodemus treats that concern with a measure of respect and sympathy, whereas Lucretius seems bound to dismiss it as irrational, for the misery of our children or friends will be just as unable to ‘stir our senses’, when we are dead, as the destruction of the world will be. But this kind of concern – a concern for other people prompted by the thought of one’s own death – is not considered in Lucretius’ writing. All the concerns discussed by him at the end of Book 3 relate to the dead person and his or her own future, although within that area he does consider a range of objects of concern, such as burial, cremation and being unburied (3.870–93) or the inability of the dead person to enjoy time with family (3.894–902).⁵⁸ Within the Symmetry argument, even the end of the world is framed by that kind of concern: will it or will it not affect the dead person? The reason for this narrower focus, by comparison with Philodemus, is, I suggest, as follows: Lucretius places his Symmetry argument directly after his arguments for the mortality of the soul, and at least at this point in his discussion he is trying to show only what follows from the soul’s mortality.⁵⁹ The fact that the human soul is mortal does not, in itself, show whether concerns for the living people left behind are rational; instead, Lucretius would have to say

⁵⁶ See Warren 2004: 66–7. ⁵⁷ So Warren 2004: 64–5.

⁵⁸ One passage seems to discuss concern for someone other than the dead person: a group of mourners acknowledge that the dead person feels no pain, but say that *they* will feel sorrow (3.904–11). But Lucretius thinks the lack of awareness after death shows that such sorrow is inappropriate. Unless his response is off target, the mourners’ sorrow must be either for the dead person, despite what they have just said, or for what awaits *them* after death (perhaps they are supposed to have been alarmed by the ‘terrifying pyre’, 906). See Kenney 2014: 196 for the talk of ‘sleep’ here.

⁵⁹ Later in his discussion of death he turns to further ethical points, such as the kind of life one has lived (3.931–62) and the similarity of non-Epicurean lives to the myths of punishment in the underworld (3.978–1023).

more about Epicurean ethics, and especially the emotions that should feature in a good life and the compatibility of altruistic friendship and love with Epicurean hedonism.

Another passage of Lucretius that contains a comparison between times is his discussion of future selves (3.847–53). For ease of reference, I divide the passage into sections.

(1) If time should assemble our matter after death and bring it back together into its current arrangement, and (2) if the light of life were again given to us, (3) it would not matter at all to us that even this had been done, when the recollection of ourselves has once been broken. (4) And now we are not at all affected by the ‘we’ who existed before, nor does any concern for them touch us.

For the sake of argument, Lucretius allows the following to happen: (1) the atoms currently constituting us are exactly reassembled, and (2) we are brought back to life. It is uncertain whether full atomic reconstitution would, on his view, automatically count as a revival of *us* – or, in other words, it is unclear whether he views (2) as a consequence of (1) or rather as an additional assumption. So it is hazardous to use the passage as evidence for his view of personal identity.⁶⁰

In (3) Lucretius considers whether it would matter to a future version of me that I, the current self, had been disassembled in death and then after an interval reassembled. If so, *my* death could indeed be something to *me* – the death that will terminate the current self might cause distress to a reconstituted self looking back into the past. His response is to show that if I were reassembled, I would, as a matter of fact, feel no distress about the fate of previous selves, as there would be no memory of them. This is not a normative claim: given the lack of memory, concern for previous selves will simply be absent, not irrational or improper. The thought is then bolstered in (4) by a comment on my current condition, and that comment is certainly not normative but factual: right now, I feel no concern at all for previous selves and their termination.⁶¹ This argument

⁶⁰ See Warren 2001a and Furley 1986: 77. Warren also comments well on the discussion of memory here: as he observes, memory is not said to be a criterion of personal identity, and Lucretius does not deny that the future selves will be ‘us’ (contrast Kenney 2014: 186). Lucretius means rather that memory is necessary if we are to feel concern about previous stages of our existence (Warren 2001a: 506–7).

⁶¹ Warren 2001a (compare Warren 2004: 76 n.30) has a different interpretation of the argument, according to which the conclusion is that we (the current self) should not, at the present time, feel concern for future instantiations of ourselves. I think the wording in (3) has a better fit with my interpretation. Lucretius says, ‘it would not matter at all to us (on my reading, the *future* self) that even this had been done, when the recollection of ourselves has once been broken’; if he had in mind

is thus not trying to show the *proper* attitude to past or future selves. Lucretius' conclusion is that a future self will inevitably feel no concern at all for the selves that pre-existed it and for their deaths, and as supporting evidence he points his readers to their own utter lack of concern for previous selves. Any future self will be just as unable to recall past versions as we currently are, and future selves will be just as indifferent as we are to a past that cannot be recollected. Allowing for a future self does not let back in the possibility of death being something to us.

We have seen three Epicurean arguments comparing different times. None is concerned exclusively with whether it will be bad not to exist, although of the three Lucretius' first argument is most closely connected to that question. Philodemus' argument compares post-mortem unawareness of the actions, and connection to us, of living people with our equal unawareness in the very distant past, and hopes to show the irrationality of feeling distress at the thought of a world in which there are no descendants to carry the flag for us. The first argument from Lucretius, the so-called Symmetry argument, showed that after death it will be impossible for anything – not only the fact that we are non-existent – to harm us, just as impossible as it was before birth. If the destruction of the world will not harm us, then a fortiori a smaller or more local event will not do so either. Lucretius' second argument shows the inevitable lack of concern, on the part of future selves, for the death of the current self and the reassembly of its components. Lucretius seeks to achieve this by reminding his readers of their own lack of concern for any previous self.

It is Cicero, a non-Epicurean, who presents on behalf of the Epicureans a temporal comparison that is narrowly about the badness of non-existence. The discussion of courage in his account of Epicurean ethics compares prenatal and post-mortem non-existence: 'a strong and lofty mind makes light of death, for those touched by death are in the same condition as they were in before they were born' (*On Moral Ends* 1.49). Cicero's argument, unlike those of Lucretius and Philodemus, is not given to make his readers stop fearing death; he is giving the shortest outline of how, on an Epicurean conception of courage, the courageous person reasons. But the passage neatly illustrates where attitudes tend to feature in such arguments: a comparison between two conditions devoid of any attitude at all creates, or should create, a different attitude to death.

present concern for future selves, he ought to have said, 'it would not matter to us that this *will* be done, given that the recollection of ourselves *will* be broken'.

6 Summary

The special prominence of death in Epicurean ethics can be explained partly in terms of the importance, within this ethical framework, of removing what is bad from life: unlike in Stoicism, attaining what is good is an easy achievement, and the challenge lies in removing the bad. In contrast with other evils, such as bodily pain, the fear of being dead can be completely eliminated. In Epicureanism, this fear is removed through the philosophy of death, not (as in Plato) through philosophy more generally. Epicureans also face the challenge of showing that we can, despite our mortality, attain the same level of happiness as imperishable gods, and this requires them to show that mortality does not diminish our happiness – another reason for the prominence of death in their ethics.

According to Epicureans, the soul-body partnership during life is necessary both for the soul's persistence and for its ability to have awareness of any kind. The fact that partnership with the body makes two contributions to the soul, not only one, is reflected in their arguments about death, some of which start from non-awareness after death, others from non-existence. In Epicurus' own arguments about death, he focusses on the 'everlasting' object of fear, not the process of dying or the fate of the people we love and leave behind. This narrow focus is reasonable, given his diagnosis of where the most intense anxiety lies. In his second *Key Doctrine*, Epicurus targets anxiety concerning the soul and body that death will separate: neither will be a subject of awareness. But in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, his argument relates to both objects and subjects of awareness: after death, the deceased and their parts will not be subjects of awareness, and so death and its deprivations will not be noticed by them. I used an Epicurean discussion of virtues to suggest how Epicurus would defend this argument against the objection, now familiar in the philosophical scholarship, that there can be unnoticed goods and evils. Epicurus has a powerful case against fears of being dead, but his arguments are less effective against attitudes and concerns that are not exactly fears.

Philodemus illustrates a different Epicurean approach to death. In the surviving parts of his work, he starts not with what is (in his view) the most intense fear relating to death, but with the diverse fears found in life and literature, particularly Homer. In his discussion of the process of dying, he tries to show it is possible to believe Epicurean theory without holding that dying is necessarily painful. Philodemus distinguishes between the fears that the admirable person will avoid and the pang of concern for family and friends; the latter should be pre-empted through practical provisions for

loved ones. Here he may have his eye on Epicurus' personal example as well as Epicurean doctrine.

In ancient philosophy of death, comparisons between past and future often do not compare retrospective and prospective attitudes. Furley and Warren have already argued for this point concerning Lucretius, and it applies also to Philodemus' discussion of dying childless. But these comparisons are still intended to affect the attitudes and emotions of living people. Lucretius' discussion of a future self compares two retrospective attitudes, and it uses the attitude to which we currently have access – our own indifference, right now, to past selves – to show that any future self will be utterly indifferent to us and our fate. As we will see in the [next chapter](#), these comparative arguments should not be treated as exclusively or even primarily Epicurean property.

*Stoic Agnosticism and Symmetry Arguments***1 Two Questions about Death**

In Epicureanism it is certain that death will be the end of the soul and its awareness. That certainty derives from the Epicureans' analysis of the soul's constituents and their view of the body's role in making sensation possible and giving the soul physical integrity. Without a body it will be impossible for a soul to survive and continue to function as it did in life. But in Stoicism the soul does not depend on the body for its physical cohesion. The relation goes in the other direction: the soul is responsible for the body's cohesion, and so there is no reason for a Stoic to suppose that without the body the soul will disintegrate. The Stoics' uncompromising corporealism about the soul in no way commits them to saying that the soul cannot outlast the body. Their corporealism does impose some constraints, at least when taken together with their cosmology: when speculating about the soul's future outside the body, Stoicism must give it a physical location within this cosmos (there is at any given time no other cosmos to house it), and in some sources we hear of Stoics locating separated souls in the upper atmosphere.¹ But even here the Stoics are not very different from Plato, whose myths describe the soul continuing to inhabit a physical environment, such as the atmosphere or a higher region of the earth.²

¹ See Sextus *Against the Physicists* 1.71–4, SVF 2.813–4. For more wide-ranging discussion of Stoic theories of the afterlife, see Hoven 1971. I am more reluctant than Hoven (1971: 37) to treat the Stoic doctrine of endless recurrence as a theory of the afterlife. The Stoic doctrine is not a response to human mortality, but results from their view of providence and of how the world sustains itself. As Sorabji has shown (1983: 188–90; 2008: 20), Stoics rarely use the doctrine to reconcile people to their mortality.

² In the *Phaedo* Socrates mentions a future for the soul that is altogether bodiless, but (as we saw in chapter 4) he says that it is hard to describe and he lacks sufficient time (114c). On the intra-cosmic location of the soul in Plato's myths, see Long (forthcoming b).

Within a corporealist framework there is abundant scope for disagreement between Stoics. Two questions stand out:

- (1) For how long does the soul survive separation from the body?
- (2) Should the separated soul be identified with the person who has undergone death?

The bare claim that the soul is corporeal answers neither question. As we will see, the Roman Stoics Seneca and Marcus Aurelius disagreed with each other in their answers to the second question.³ Concerning the first question, we have a record of disagreement at an early stage in the school's history. As we saw in chapter 3, the early Stoics argued that the current organization of the world will be destroyed in a conflagration, and this guarantees that there will be an end for all souls that are parts of the world (namely, all souls in existence, except Zeus). Whereas the Stoic Cleanthes held that all souls last until the conflagration, his successor Chrysippus thought that only the souls of the virtuous last that long (Diogenes Laertius 7.157). At root this is a contest between the claims of soul as such – as the source of cohesion it must be long-lived – and the claims of the *virtuous* soul to be especially robust. We may wonder what virtue has to do with durability, but in Stoicism all moral qualities belong to something corporeal, a soul, and so can be given a physical description. To quote David Sedley, 'a soul's strength is its moral health; but that very same strength can be cited as the basis of its durability, which enables it to survive outside the body'.⁴

A later Stoic, Panaetius, then detached this question of the soul's survival from that of the conflagration. He denied that the world will be destroyed in a conflagration,⁵ and now an endless future for the soul looks possible. But Panaetius also tried to show, independently of theories about the world and its duration, that the soul will be destroyed. According to Cicero, one of Panaetius' arguments relied on the assumption that anything with a beginning must come to an end. Panaetius argued that the resemblances

³ For Chrysippus' view of identity, see Sedley 1982 and Bowin 2003. His theory of the conflagration suggests that our identity is preserved by separated souls: at the conflagration, only the creator or designer god's soul exists to carry his identity into the future, and if that god persists by virtue of his soul's persisting, the same should apply to human beings and their souls. According to a survey of Stoic doctrines preserved in Eusebius, 'when we are separated from the body we ourselves survive, having come to be souls and changed into the lesser substance of the soul' (*Preparation for the gospel* 15.20.6 = SVF 2.809 = Long and Sedley 1987, 53W). The notorious puzzle of Dion and Theon should not guide interpretation of the Stoic theory of the soul and personal identity, despite Philo's objection in *On the imperishability of the world* 48–51. As Sedley has argued (1982: 270), the puzzle of Dion and Theon 'borrowed its premisses' from Academics and their use of the Growing argument.

⁴ 1993: 328. ⁵ Philo *On the imperishability of the World* 76.

between children and their parents show the soul to have a beginning: children resemble their parents in intellect and character as well as physically, and this shows, he argued, that the children's souls must derive from their parents no less than their bodies do. As a generated item, the soul must come to an end. A second argument given by Panaetius is that the soul's susceptibility to distress and pain shows that it can become ill, and anything susceptible to illness must come to an end (Cicero *Tusculans* 1.79) – an argument similar to those offered by the Epicurean Lucretius in the third book of his poem. Panaetius' arguments show merely that the soul does not last forever; they do not establish whether souls are destroyed at the moment of separation from the body, and whether some last longer than others. So it is unlikely that Panaetius was using the two arguments to address those further questions. He may have intended merely to show why, in an unending world, there will not be an infinite proliferation of souls. A soul is generated whenever people reproduce, but (setting aside the souls of the gods) each soul will at some point be ended.

The chapter will focus on the Roman Stoics whose writing about death has survived most fully, particularly Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. These Roman philosophers address the question of the soul's survival with less urgency than we might expect. Surely, we might say (especially if we come to Stoicism from works like Plato's *Phaedo*), our attitude to death will be determined by the fate of the separated soul, and so in any discussion of death that question must be settled first. But Stoic consolation is often more about coming to terms with an ending than establishing what survives of us, or the length of its survival. Stoics even made use of the kind of argument used by Epicureans, including the comparison between times exemplified by Lucretius' Symmetry argument. One task of this chapter is to explain the appeal of such arguments to Stoics. Another is to show that in antiquity this kind of argument was not regarded as Epicurean property, and this will require us to look at Symmetry arguments in a wider range of texts, including the dialogue *Axiochus*.

2 The Place of Death in Stoic Ethics

When we look at Stoic writing in detail, we will get a sense of each author's individuality as a philosopher and writer. For now, I will give a broad outline of the ethical aims that cause Stoic writers to discuss death: this will show why death is a recurrent object of interest in Stoicism, but in a different way from Epicureanism, and why it is harder to generalize about Stoicism.

One aim of Stoic ethics is to foster the right attitude to the items that are chosen, avoided or just happen, regardless of our choices. Stoics encourage their pupils to become virtuous and avoid the moral vices, but striving to become virtuous is a special kind of choice, and the texts use special vocabulary for it.⁶ We are considering attitudes not to virtue and vice, but to items that are in themselves morally neutral, such as health and wealth, and that can be possessed, or happen to someone, whether or not the person is virtuous. As we will see in more detail in [chapter 7, section 5](#), Stoics hold that human beings have a natural inclination to pursue some of these items, such as health and life, and avoid others, such as illness and – most relevantly for our purposes – death. In most circumstances, people should try to attain members of the first group and avoid the members of the other group, but sometimes, despite their best efforts, they will fail. Success and failure do not make people happy or unhappy: happiness, in the Stoic conception, derives solely from becoming virtuous and acting accordingly. A large part of ethical progress, as Stoics conceive of it, is learning to act and reason with the right levels of commitment and detachment. People should recognize their own natural and unavoidable tendency to favour some items and avoid others, and give it suitable motivational weight, without connecting those items to happiness.

Death thus has the same negative value as a large and varied group of items, including illness and poverty. It is up to the individual Stoic philosopher to decide whether to focus on death or some other member of the group. The author must also decide whether to relate death to other members of the group – and if so, whether death is the primary object of concern. It need not be: death can be used to change the reader's attitude to something else, such as poverty or pain. A common tactic is to show that death will bring to an end the other items that we want to avoid, and that suicide (often mentioned euphemistically as a kind of departure) can be chosen if we find something actually unbearable. For example, the Stoic Epictetus' essay on 'circumstances' (1.24), such as poverty, exile and low social status, ends as follows:

Do not become more of a coward than little children. As they say 'I won't play any more' when they dislike it, so when things seem like that to you, say 'I won't play any more' and take your leave. But if you do stay, no lamentation.⁷

⁶ See [chapter 7](#), n.43.

⁷ Such passages, taken in isolation, give a misleading picture of the Stoic view of suicide: they suggest that the Stoic pays no regard to other people or the gods when considering whether to carry on living. But see [chapter 7, section 5](#).

Here Epictetus is taking it for granted that his readers do not find death an even less attractive prospect than low status and poverty. On the other hand, it is open to him to write in a different way, focussing on attitudes to death and arguing, as an Epicurean would, against the fear of death.

In Seneca's letters, death and the availability of suicide are used particularly often to transform attitudes to other non-moral items. Readiness to die will remove people's vulnerability to misfortune (70.7):

Should I think that fortune has complete power over the living person?
Should I not rather think that fortune has no power over the person who
knows how to die?

But on this subject, as on others, Seneca's letters do not take a fixed position. After repeatedly using death to alleviate other concerns,⁸ Seneca suggests that this approach should eventually become unnecessary. The good Stoic should be able to consider other non-moral items, such as pain, without deriving resilience from the prospect of death's ending them. Instead, she or he should see simply that those items, like death, are not truly evil (98.18):

Death does not make him braver against pain, nor pain against death. He trusts himself against both, and his steadfastness in pain does not come from the hope of death, nor does his cheerfulness at death come from weariness of pain. He endures pain and waits for death.

We have seen Stoics trying to create in their readers and pupils the right attitude to non-moral items. A second aim of Stoic ethics is to transform their pupils' conception of themselves. Stoics aim to see themselves primarily as makers of rational decisions, such that rationality becomes the measure of success. Partly they have in mind a contrast between knowledge and rationality: even if we do not know for sure what the outcome of our actions will be, we can still succeed in making the most rational choice available to us. But it has an important application in adverse circumstances: even if all the options are, in some way, unattractive, there is still scope for a well-reasoned choice. Here too Stoics often – uncomfortably often, for modern readers – mention suicide as a rational choice in extreme circumstances. But the rational choice may of course be different, such as choosing poverty, in a case where it is rational to pay vast medical fees to end an illness. Here again the Stoic author can choose whether to focus on death or on some other alternative to the prospect that is causing concern.

⁸ 'Death is so little to be feared that thanks to its benefit nothing is to be feared' (24.11). Compare e.g. 70.15, 78.25, 91.21.

Finally, Stoics aim to relate themselves to the cosmos as a whole, which they believe to be rationally ordered. Often this is through the part/whole relationship, and that has a bearing on the Stoic view of proper functions: as a part of the cosmos, we cannot fully understand our function without considering our place in the cosmos. Stoic authors sometimes use our fate at death to explore our relationship with the cosmos:

Death is this: a greater change from *what is now* into *what is not now*, not⁹ into *what is not*. So will I no longer exist? No, you won't. Something else will, of which the cosmos has need. After all, you did not come to be when you wanted, but when the cosmos had need. (Epictetus 3.24.94)

Even while Epictetus acknowledges that something will exist after your death, he refuses to treat it as providing personal survival for the deceased. What matters is accepting that what exists, whether or not that includes you, is determined by the cosmos itself. This feature of Stoic ethics does not rely on treating the separated soul as carrying into the future the identity of the dead human being. But elsewhere Stoics, particularly Seneca, suggest that a future for my soul would be a future for me as well.

From this it may sound as if Stoics approach the subject of death with fewer constraints than Epicureans do. There is a risk of overstating the contrast. Roman Stoics do not write as if their Stoicism commits them to denying or affirming that death is the end for each of us. For Epicureans, the question has been answered: death is the end. But this is not to say that Epicureans simply repeat what Epicurus has already shown. As we have seen, later Epicureans like Philodemus have most room for originality when they address fears other than the fear of being dead. Epicurus had blazed the trail in his writing about being dead, but the prospect of death causes people to worry about things other than the state of being dead, and later Epicureans could write new evaluations, in a mocking or sympathetic spirit, of those other fears.

3 *Symmetry Arguments in Seneca's Letters*

We can designate as a 'Symmetry argument' any argument that uses the similarity between prenatal and post-mortem non-existence to promote or challenge an attitude to death. The Stoic author Seneca provides three such

⁹ This accepts the corrector's addition of οὐκ (as in the quotation of this passage at Marcus Aurelius 11.35).

arguments in his letters to Lucilius,¹⁰ and our first task is to make sense of the contrasts between them. On the first occasion, Seneca has just suffered a severe attack of his illness, probably asthma.¹¹ Here he describes how he reassured himself during the attack (54.4):

(A) ‘What is this?’ I asked. ‘Is death testing me so often? Let it do so. I tried out death long ago.’ ‘When?’ you ask. Before I was born. Death is non-existence, and I already know what that is like. What was before me will be after me. If there is any torment in that, there must have been torment before we emerged into the light. But we felt no disturbance then.

From this it sounds as if Seneca is committed to the destruction of the soul at death. But the next passage, the closing words of letter 65, shows him open to the possibility that death has another outcome for the soul, namely, transition to some other state or location (65.24). I quote the previous sentences, for, as we will see, the context is important.

(B) The soul has the same role in a human being that god has in the world. What matter is in the world is in us the body. So let the inferior parts serve their betters. Let us be brave against the works of fortune. Let us not tremble at injuries, wounds, chains or poverty. What is death? Either an end or a transition. I do not fear coming to an end, for that is the same as not having begun. Nor do I fear making a transition, for nowhere will I be in such confines. Farewell.

On this occasion too Seneca has been suffering from problems with his asthma (65.1). But now, unlike in letter 54, his comments on death are postponed until the very end of the letter. Between the mention of his illness and his comments on death, he places a discussion of causes that is far more technical and elaborate than anything we find in letter 54. The debate about causes becomes theological, for in Stoicism the primary cause is unitary, god (65.12), whereas Plato supposed that the creation of the world cannot be explained in terms of god alone. Plato theorized that god can create the world only by cooperating with a range of other causes, all of which, except god himself, are superfluous from a Stoic perspective. This debate with Platonism might seem a distraction from the serious business of ethics, particularly in a letter which began with a reminder of Seneca’s mortality. Seneca imagines and responds to just such a complaint (65.15–16):

¹⁰ See also *To Marcia* 19.5 and *To Polybius* 9.2. From his tragedies, compare the discussion of death in *Trojan Women* 371–408, particularly 407–8 (‘you ask where you lie after death? Together with the unborn’). This seems based on Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, where Andromache says, ‘I declare not being born and death equal’ (636); for Plutarch’s use of this line, see [section 4](#) below. Williams ([forthcoming](#)) discusses death and the afterlife in Seneca’s tragedies and other writing.

¹¹ For Seneca’s recurring illness, see Griffin 1992: 42–43.

'What do you find attractive,' you ask, 'in squandering time on such questions, which remove none of your passions and drive away none of your desires?' But in fact I do pursue these more important questions,¹² and I engage in the subjects by which the mind is calmed. I examine myself first, then the world. Nor am I wasting time now, as you believe. For all these matters elevate the mind, provided that they are not chopped into tiny sections or dragged into useless technicality, and they lighten the mind from the heavy load under which it longs to spread itself and return to the items of which it was once a part.

The two letters thus start with Seneca in illness and then illustrate two contrasting ways to approach the subject of death. In letter 54 Seneca turns *directly* to the prospect of death and its character, whereas in letter 65 he considers death only after a long examination of cosmological and metaphysical questions: causation and god's role in the world. At the end of the letter, passage (B) above, he then illustrates how these subjects bear on our thinking about death: they prepare the soul for separation from the body, if that will be its fate, by encouraging the soul to identify with the cosmos and its divine creator more than with the human body it currently inhabits.¹³ Separation from this body will not seem an unattractive prospect: 'when I see fit, I will break my association with this paltry body' (65.22). Scholars often find these passages reminiscent of Plato and particularly the *Phaedo*, despite Seneca's criticism of Plato elsewhere in the letter.¹⁴ One point on which the *Phaedo* and Seneca agree is that one can prepare for death by pursuing philosophy into subjects other than death. This marks a division between Plato and Seneca, on the one hand, and Epicureans on the other.

The attraction of a Symmetry argument in these two contexts, letters 54 and 65, is that it is available both with and without these technical reflections on god, the cosmos and the soul. Such an argument presupposes merely that one possible outcome of death is non-existence and that non-existence after death is similar, in the relevant respects, to non-existence before birth. So Seneca can deploy the Symmetry argument both in the more technical letter 65 and in letter 54, when his illness takes him

¹² Reading *potiora* rather than *peiora*.

¹³ There is a tension in Seneca's attitude here: sometimes he suggests that merely engaging in the study of god and causation, as long as one avoids needless technicality, elevates the mind (65.16). That makes it sound as if it is possible for Platonists or Epicureans too. But then he says that the specifically Stoic theory of god and matter causes one to view the body correctly (65.24). Compare Inwood 2007a: 155.

¹⁴ But the trend now is firmly against viewing Seneca as abandoning Stoicism. Inwood 2007a: 150–1 argues that Seneca's interest in the *Phaedo* is not taking him away from mainstream Stoicism. Boys-Stones 2013 interprets the letter as a polemical response, on behalf of Stoic metaphysics, to the *Phaedo*.

immediately to thoughts about mortality. By contrast, the other possible outcome of death, a continued existence for the soul alone, will become a source of comfort only when Seneca is in a position to show that the ‘transition’, and continued existence without one’s body, ought not to be a matter for regret. Seneca does not take it for granted that the continued existence of the soul after death will be, in itself, consoling – another point of agreement between him and Plato (see [chapter 2, section 2](#)).

In both passages Seneca is making himself an exemplary figure, as often in the letters. So while the passages are framed as an explanation of Seneca’s own attitude to death, they are clearly intended to make a difference to his readers’ attitude. His third use of a Symmetry argument is found in a more adversarial context (77.11):

(C) Don’t you think the man who wept because he was not alive a thousand years ago is as stupid as one could be? Well, someone who weeps because he will not be alive a thousand years in the future is equally stupid. These are equal: you will not be, and you were not. Neither time is yours.

This passage undeniably compares the attitudes held during life.¹⁵ Seneca expects Lucilius to concede that the retrospective attitude is hopelessly irrational, and then to concede that the reason for its irrationality applies also to the equivalent prospective attitude. What exactly is the attitude against which he is writing? It is an attachment to being alive – that is, to being a composite of body and soul – and a desire to extend the current mode of existence endlessly into the future: ‘I want to live’ (77.18, 19). There is little reason to expect a person with this desire to be reconciled to death by being shown that the *soul* alone will, or may, continue to exist after death: what they want is for their life, and the present partnership of soul and body, to continue endlessly into the future. It is not surprising, then, that Seneca makes no mention of the ‘transition’ that he himself would welcome in letter 65, for the attitude he is targeting involves a strong attachment to the body. Once again it is the Symmetry argument that can be put to work: the absence of life in the remote future will be no different from its absence in the distant past.

It is worth pointing out that attitudes being compared are to the remote past and to the remote future. If the comparison is brought within a much smaller temporal frame, Seneca’s readers would find the symmetry less convincing.¹⁶ For when people form plans and aspirations for the near

¹⁵ So Warren 2004: 71.

¹⁶ ‘The closer I get to my own times and to the length of a plausible human life, the less impressive the argument from symmetry becomes’ (Armstrong 2004: 33).

future – whether they are projects over which they have a measure of control, such as composing a piece of music, or aspirations that depend almost entirely on the actions of other people, such as seeing within one's lifetime a member of a minority group become head of state – their emotional commitment will be unlike the attitude with which they view the past. We may wish we had been alive a few years before our birth, but when we form plans for the future, the date of our birth will be taken as a given, if it is thought about at all. Sometimes it may matter to us very strongly whether we live to see those plans or aspirations fulfilled. It is unlikely that Seneca would be very impressed by this objection: he would ask to be shown in each case why it *should* matter that we live to see these aspirations and projects fulfilled, and what makes the asymmetry between attitudes correct.¹⁷ But his choice of remote past and future prevents him from having to consider this kind of difficulty for the symmetry.

In offering these Symmetry arguments, Seneca shows no embarrassment about using an Epicurean form of argument. Seneca is certainly capable of using Epicurean writing and doctrine: Epicurus' letters are a major literary model for him,¹⁸ and he is well known for exploring Epicurean arguments sympathetically, although of course as a Stoic. According to his self-description, he enters the Epicurean 'camp', but 'as a spy, not a deserter' (2.5). But he shows no sign of regarding the Symmetry arguments as Epicurean arguments. When Seneca cites Epicurus or an Epicurean argument, he is often explicit in marking its origin, such as when he discusses the pain of dying (22.13–14, 24.22–23, 30.14), whereas the Symmetry argument is never said by him to be Epicurean. Furthermore, if Seneca did regard the argument as Epicurean, his use of it would be out of place. Seneca uses Epicurean doctrines and arguments predominantly in the early letters, several of which conclude with a memorable maxim by Epicurus. Letter 33 seems to mark a turning point, for Seneca now says that he will no longer provide Lucilius with such maxims and suggests that they are suitable only for beginners.¹⁹ From this point Epicurus is mentioned more rarely.²⁰ An attractive explanation of the shift is that Lucilius, the addressee, has been making progress, at least within the fictional world of

¹⁷ Compare Parfit's discussion of our bias towards the future (1984: 165–81) and Rosenbaum's response, which is to query whether this bias can be shown to be reasonable (1989: 367): 'the fundamental problem is that the bias seems not to have any basis in reasons, related to what one knows or justifiably believes to be dangerous. The bias seems a simple, unexplained, psychological phenomenon rooted in the way in which humans are inclined to respond to prospective bad experiences.' See also Warren 2004: 82–93.

¹⁸ Inwood 2007b: 146. ¹⁹ See Boys-Stones 2013: 133; Graver and Long 2015: 11.

²⁰ For the exceptions, see Boys-Stones 2013: 132 n.10.

the correspondence, and Seneca sees Epicurean arguments and doctrines, as well as Epicurus' memorable maxims, as particularly appropriate for the early stages of a philosophical education.²¹ From letter 33 Lucilius is ready for more demanding lessons, and must be more discriminating in his use of philosophy. So no more Epicurean maxims, and fewer uses of Epicurean argumentation. But the Symmetry argument is given *after* this switch, in letters 54, 65 and 77.

Lucretius' version of the argument has dominated the recent philosophical debate, and this may cause us to regard the argument as Epicurean in the first instance, Stoic, Platonist and so on only by appropriation. But Seneca may have seen things differently. As a composer of tragedies, he would have been familiar with a comparison between death and prenatal non-existence in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, staged more than 70 years before Epicurus' birth.²² It is also worth keeping in mind the gaps in our knowledge of Hellenistic philosophical writing about death. The Academic Crantor wrote an *On Grief* that was read and appreciated by members of other traditions, including Stoicism: Cicero tells us that Crantor's book was regarded with special respect by Seneca's Stoic predecessor Panaetius. Aristotle's successor Theophrastus wrote a work called *Callisthenes, or On Grief*.²³ If these or other lost texts explored parallels between prenatal and post-mortem non-existence, it would be reasonable for Seneca to view Symmetry arguments as already being common property.

We might think that philosophically this counts for little: no matter whether or not the argument is *said* to be Epicurean, its assumptions are Epicurean, particularly the assumption that the soul does not exist after death. But an author need not be fully committed to the destruction of the soul at death in order to offer a Symmetry argument. This brings us to the question of Seneca's own position on the soul's destruction. Overall in the letters, Seneca is undecided. The closest he comes to pronouncing the soul

²¹ See Boys-Stones 2013: 132–4.

²² See n.10 above. The fourth-century Athenian orator Hyperides compares the condition after birth with that after death: 'if death is similar to not having been born, they are free of illness, distress and the other things that come into human life' (*Funeral Oration* 43).

²³ Cicero *On Academic Scepticism* 2.135. Works on grief could certainly contain Symmetry arguments, for the third-century Cynic philosopher Teles compares prenatal and post-mortem non-existence when discussing attitudes to other people's deaths: "he will no longer exist." "He did not exist ten thousand years ago, nor during the Trojan War. Nor did he exist in the time of your great-grandfathers. But you do not grieve at that, and yet you complain that he will not exist in the future." For the Greek text, see Hense 1889: 47 lines 3–6. For Crantor's *On Grief*, see Mette 1984; Graver 2002: 83–4 and 187–94; Dillon 2003: 224–31. For Theophrastus' *Callisthenes*, see Fortenbaugh and Gutas 2011: 170–4.

'everlasting' is in letter 102, but on closer inspection even this letter remains agnostic. He describes himself as ready to believe the soul everlasting (*aeternus*), but then adds immediately that the philosophers who defend the soul's everlastingness do not prove it so much as promise it (102.2).²⁴ At the end of the same letter, he comments favourably on those who judge that the soul perishes as soon as it is separated from the body: they strive to be beneficial after death by leading lives that will be exemplary to others (102.30). The point of the letter is not to signal Seneca's commitment to the soul's everlastingness, but rather to compare this subject with one less worthy of serious attention: whether the intricate Stoic theory of value permits renown to be genuinely good. Seneca spends much of the letter examining that question and then, having left his reader in no doubt about his competence to discuss it, dismisses the question altogether and reverts to the theme of the soul: 'it should not be our intention to discuss quibbles and drag philosophy from her own majesty into these trifles' (102.20). Here, as in letter 65, Seneca is considering which technical subjects of philosophy affect our ethical outlook. A point in favour of the question of an everlasting soul is that considering that question closely will have a benign moral effect regardless of which decision the philosopher reaches: those who decide that the soul is destroyed at death will commit themselves to benefiting later generations, reflecting that the example they set will, unlike their soul, survive their death, whereas those who believe the soul to be everlasting will face death without fear (102.29–30). Other letters are more straightforwardly agnostic: 'the soul is either released into a better life, to dwell with the gods in a greater light and with more peace, or it will be without any misfortune, mixed again with nature and returning to the universe' (71.16); 'death either consumes us or releases us' (54.18; compare 57.9).

Seneca's commitment is best expressed as a conditional: if our souls are everlasting, then *we* are everlasting. When he allows himself to hope that the soul is everlasting, he is confident that a future for his soul would be a future for him (102.27–29).²⁵ At the time when Seneca was writing, the Stoics' opponents had already complained that Stoic ethics treats the human being as a mind or soul, not a combination of body and soul

²⁴ Seneca here avoids the word 'immortal' (*immortalis*). This may be because he is considering the view that the soul is intrinsically everlasting, whereas Chrysippus (see [chapter 3, section 3](#)) presented immortality as an achievement for the virtuous alone.

²⁵ Compare the description of the celestial existence now enjoyed by Marcia's dead son (*To Marcia, On Consolation* 25–26). 'He is complete; he left nothing of himself on earth and has, in his entirety, departed' (25.1).

(Cicero *On Moral Ends* 4.26–7).²⁶ Seneca would concede that the identification of the person with his or her soul is not something he can take for granted in his readership, and even he himself can fully embrace such a view of himself only after engaging in the reflections on god and everlastingness that are usually avoided in the letters. A second feature of his writing about death – the word ‘commitment’ may be too strong²⁷ – is that when considering the future after death only two options are brought to mind: either the soul is destroyed, or it continues to exist in some better manner without the body. Two alternatives are discounted: the soul having a worse future after death and the soul passing into other bodies. As he puts it in letter 65, if the soul survives death he will not be in such confines again anywhere (passage (B) above). It is as if Plato’s myths of punishment and suggestion of reincarnation had never been written. But the telescoping of post-mortem options is in keeping with what we find even in authors who openly admire Plato, such as Cicero (see [chapter 4, section 3](#)).

4 Are Symmetry Arguments Epicurean? Plutarch and the *Axiochus*

Seneca’s reflections on death combine Symmetry arguments with agnosticism about the soul’s everlastingness.²⁸ Before we turn to our next Stoic author, Marcus Aurelius, let us see how other non-Epicurean texts regard Symmetry arguments and their assumptions: must one be an Epicurean, or be committed to the soul’s destruction at death, to offer a Symmetry argument? We find the same combination of agnosticism and Symmetry argument in the *Consolation to Apollonius* attributed to Plutarch. (I will speak of the author as Plutarch, although scholars do not agree on his authorship.) The text is written to comfort Apollonius at the death of his son. In the part of the text where Plutarch offers his Symmetry argument, he is assuming that death destroys the soul as well as the body. But he is adopting a Socratic even-handedness, in the spirit of Plato’s *Apology* (see [chapter 4, section 1](#)). Death resembles, or ‘is close to’, one of three items: a deep sleep, a journey or the destruction of body and soul (107d).

²⁶ See Inwood 2007a: 152.

²⁷ Seneca is familiar with the doctrine of metempsychosis and mentions it without dismissing it as absurd (65.20, 88.34, 108.19–21).

²⁸ Contrast Pliny *Natural History* 7.188–90, where Pliny both uses the Symmetry argument and denies that the soul survives death.

Plutarch, like Socrates, tries to show that none of the possible outcomes would cause us harm. It is within this Socratic framework that he discusses the possibility of annihilation and offers the Symmetry argument (109e-f):

Those who have died enter the same condition as they were in before birth. Therefore, just as nothing was either good or bad for us before our birth, nothing will be good or bad for us after our death either. And as what happened before us was nothing to us, so will the events after us be nothing to us.

Plutarch's argument resembles most of the arguments we have seen already – the exception is the argument in Seneca's letter 77 – in comparing the periods before birth and after death, not attitudes taken by the living. As in Lucretius' Symmetry argument, Plutarch is arguing not merely that the fact of our deaths will be nothing to us, but more generally that the events after our death – in his words, 'the events after us' – will be nothing to us. Plutarch's wording, especially 'nothing to us', cannot help but remind us of Epicurus. But Plutarch makes no reference to Epicureanism. Instead, he suggests, by means of quotations, that Greek poetry offers, independently of Epicurus, the key points with which we can reconcile ourselves to death, including the comparison of antenatal past and post-mortem future: the passages quoted by Plutarch include 'I declare not being born and death equal' (Euripides *Trojan Women* 636, quoted already in n.10 above); 'he was put together and then broken up; he has departed to that from which he came' (Epicharmus). The failure to mention Epicurus at all may be disingenuous: Plutarch may be aware of similar Epicurean texts, but wish to suggest that Socrates and the Greek poetic tradition speak as powerfully against the fear of death as the Epicureans had done, even on the assumption that death terminates our existence.²⁹

In the context of consolation, Plutarch needs some way to connect the absence of evil after death with the attitudes of living people. In the Epicurean literature examined in the [previous chapter](#) that connection was provided by Epicurus' comment on fear, 'that which produces no disturbance when present causes an empty distress when anticipated' (*Letter to Menoeceus* 125), and by a similar assumption in Philodemus. But here too Plutarch overlooks Epicureanism. He suggests that the Academic tradition can supply the necessary connection between the

²⁹ But here again we should be open to the possibility that Symmetry arguments were not regarded in antiquity as Epicurean. Plutarch's *Consolation to his wife* dismisses as Epicurean – 'the other lot, who win round many people' – not the use of Symmetry arguments but the claim that death 'disintegrates' the person or their soul (611d; compare *Key Doctrine* 2).

outcome of death and our attitudes: he quotes the Academic Arcesilaus' comment that death is unique in causing distress when absent, in anticipation, and never causing distress when present (110a). From this it is but a short step to viewing some attitudes to death as irrational: if the period after death will be as devoid of evil as the period before birth, it would be irrational to fear it, given that in all other cases we are distressed by the prospect of an event only when its *presence* will cause us distress. This concerns one's own mortality, and we might expect Plutarch to focus on a different sort of distress: given that Apollonius' son has died, the only relevant distress, we might think, is the kind felt at the deaths of other people. But in this passage he is clearly targeting the distress people feel at the thought of their own death, for in the next sentence he mocks those desperate to stop themselves from dying.³⁰

Earlier in the text, Plutarch has applied a Socratic distinction between destruction, sleep and a journey as possible outcomes of death. So there is no inconsistency between (1) comparing non-existence after death and before birth and (2) ending the consolation in the way he does – with a myth about the judgement of souls in the afterlife (120e–121e). He is exploring different outcomes of death and showing that none presents us with a reason for fear or concern. Our final example of a Symmetry argument, from the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*, presents more of a challenge in this regard.³¹ In the dialogue Socrates convinces Axiochus not to fear death. Axiochus' death is now approaching, and at the start of the dialogue he tells Socrates that he is no longer reassured by the arguments that previously were able to remove his fear (365c). By the end of the dialogue, he is not only reconciled to his imminent death but actually desires to die (372a). Axiochus' attitude to death is affected most by the argument for the immortality of the soul (370b–d) and by the myth Socrates relates of the afterlife (371a–372a). After that myth, Socrates claims not only to believe but to know that the soul is immortal: 'drawn by the

³⁰ When Plutarch consoles his own wife on the death of their young daughter, he encourages her to put herself into the same frame of mind she was in before the birth (610d). This might seem to be yet another Symmetry argument. But Plutarch is probably suggesting not that the two times are in fact relevantly similar, but merely that it will help his wife to go back to her old way of thinking: 'in your thinking try to take yourself back and restore yourself as often as you can to that time when we had no complaint against fortune; then join this current period with that one, *as if* we were again in similar circumstances' (ὥς ὁμοίων πάλιν τῶν περὶ ἡμᾶς γεγονότων). Soon afterwards, he encourages her to remember their daughter (610d–e), and so is obviously aware of the difference between the two periods.

³¹ Hershbelle 1981: 12–20 sets out the evidence against Platonic authorship, and tentatively dates the dialogue to the second to first century BC.

account,³² I have firm knowledge of only one thing – all soul is immortal'. But earlier in the dialogue Socrates has given the following Symmetry argument (365d-e):

As there was no evil concerning you in the government of Draco or Cleisthenes – for you did not exist at all for it to concern you – so there will be no evil concerning you after your death. For then you will not exist for it to concern you.

Here, once again, the argument compares the periods before birth and after death, and, as in Lucretius, denies not only that Axiochus' death will be an evil for him, but that *anything* will be an evil for him when he is dead. The problem is not the interpretation of the argument so much as integrating it into the dialogue. Socrates does not recognize the inconsistency between this argument and his 'knowledge' of the soul's immortality. Unlike Plutarch, or the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, he has not distinguished between different outcomes of death, and does not represent himself as exploring alternative outcomes in sequence. On the face of it, he believes both that Axiochus' soul is immortal and that Axiochus will no longer exist after his death.

The problem should not be addressed by denying Socrates' commitment to the immortality of the soul. He claims that the soul's immortality is, uniquely, what he knows for sure. Instead it is the Symmetry argument that may not reflect Socrates' own view of death and personal survival. Before the Symmetry argument, Axiochus has expressed anxieties that, taken literally, identify him with the body soon to become a corpse: 'I will lie rotting, changing into worms and wild animals' (365d). The Symmetry argument then, I suggest, assumes this view of Axiochus' identity: if, as Axiochus believes, he is his body, then after death – or at least after decomposition – he will no longer exist to be the subject of any harm. My interpretation receives some confirmation from Socrates' remarks directly after the Symmetry argument (365e-366a):

Away with all such nonsense! Keep in mind that when the combination has once been broken up and the soul has come to reside in its own place, the body that is left over, earthy and irrational, is not the human being. For we are soul, an immortal creature confined in a mortal prison.

The Symmetry argument thus depends on a view of personal identity from which Socrates soon distances himself. But the author may believe it an

³² He refers not only to arguments but also to the myth, which has been described as a λόγος (371a).

effective argument for people who have not yet come to identify themselves with their souls, and so it is appropriate for Socrates to offer as if it were his own invention. The Symmetry argument is thus unlike the more overtly Epicurean argument given later in the dialogue, which is attributed by Socrates not to a philosopher but to a sophist, Prodicus: ‘as far as the living are concerned, death does not exist, and the dead do not exist’ (369b, almost a quotation of Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus* 125). That Epicurean argument – a ‘sophistic’ argument, the attribution to Prodicus suggests – proves utterly ineffective with Axiochus, who dismisses it as an ‘ornamental parade of words’ (369d).³³ After hearing the argument, he is still distressed at the thought that he will be deprived of the good things of life. The author is trying to show the inability of Epicurean arguments to comfort people like Axiochus, and this is in keeping with the allegiance to Plato signalled by the dialogue’s form. But the Symmetry argument is treated separately, and unlike the echo of Epicurus’ letter it is *not* attributed to the sophist Prodicus. This confirms the growing impression that the argument was not perceived as Epicurean. So when Seneca gives several versions of this argument, he need not have set foot inside the Epicurean ‘camp’, even as a spy.

5 Marcus Aurelius

It is appropriate to give the last word in this chapter to Marcus Aurelius and his thoughts on death. In the text known today as the *Meditations* – Marcus himself may not have given it a title – he returns again and again to the subject of death.³⁴ Unlike Lucretius, who devotes a single long passage at the end of Book 3 to the fear of death, Marcus scatters comments on death throughout his work. All of them are addressed to himself. The effect is continually to check in himself any apprehension at the thought of death, and to prevent fear or concern from getting a foothold in his mind. This is a very particular kind of self-administered therapy, resembling a series of small booster doses rather than an uninterrupted course of treatment. Marcus urges himself to seek in his own thinking a ‘retreat’, and to do so ‘continually’: ‘renew yourself, and let your points be brief and elementary, such that on encountering you they will immediately be enough to wash

³³ Compare O’Keefe 2006: 397 n.14; Irwin 2015: 77–78. Rather than removing the inconsistency between the Symmetry argument and Socrates’ ‘knowledge’ that the soul is immortal, O’Keefe 2006 suggests that Socrates’ philosophical therapy permits him to use inconsistent arguments. For an original treatment of the *Axiochus* that also turns on notions of personal identity, see Warren (forthcoming).

³⁴ For the title, see Brunt 1974: 1; Rutherford 1989: 9–10; Long 2012: 465.

off all distress, and send you back with no complaint about the things to which you return' (4.3.1). Those final words refer to the aspects of his life to which he will return after his moments of retreat, but they apply to death as well, which, as he often reminds himself, will come soon.

In Marcus we find a double agnosticism. Like Seneca, he is uncertain as to whether the soul survives death. The different possible outcomes are variously expressed: either a different life or the lack of awareness (3.3.2); no awareness or a different kind of awareness (8.58); being extinguished, being dispersed, or staying together (11.3).³⁵ It is as if Marcus wishes not only to avoid taking a position on the future of the soul, but also to prevent his description of the possibilities from ossifying and so ceasing to have the required effect on himself. From Marcus' point of view, being a Stoic – not that he explicitly identifies himself as a Stoic – does not require choosing one of these options over the others: if the world forms a coherent unit, as in Stoicism, then there will be *either* an extinction *or* a transition (7.32).³⁶ (By contrast, according to the same passage Epicureanism allows for only one outcome: if the world is composed of atoms, then we will be dispersed at death.) If there is a 'transition', it need not involve an eternal future. On the contrary, he says that on the 'hypothesis' that souls survive separation from the body, their 'transition' will be to move into the atmosphere for only a finite period. After that, the souls will be 'diffused and burned up' (4.21).

The second agnosticism is less openly expressed, but it helps explain Marcus' distinctive attitude to death. Here again a comparison with Seneca is illuminating: in Seneca there was no doubt that a future for the soul would be a future for him, and that an endless future for his soul would confer everlastingness on him. We see this with particular clarity in letter 102. But Marcus shows uncertainty as to whether his soul's continued existence, after death, would provide *him* with a future. When he describes a future for the soul after death, his emphasis is as much on transformation as on continuity. The following passage strikes an ambivalent note (8.58):

He who fears death fears either the lack of awareness or different kind of awareness. If you no longer have awareness, you will not notice anything evil; if you gain a somewhat different kind of awareness, you will be a different kind of creature, and you will not cease living.

³⁵ See also 5.33, 6.4, 6.10, 6.24, 8.25, 10.7.2.

³⁶ Marcus' failure to identify himself as a Stoic is not, in itself, very revealing about his philosophical identity or profile; he is addressing himself, and there is no need for him to remind himself about his allegiance. His silence on this point suggests rather that he wishes to make each of his ethical points depend on something other than his philosophical allegiance, such as the nature of the world or his relationship with it.

If Marcus has awareness of any kind, then he must be the sort of thing to possess awareness, namely, a ‘creature’ or animal. As such he will still be alive (in Greek the word for ‘creature’ or ‘animal’, ζῷον, suggests a *living* creature, the verb for ‘live’ being ζῆν). But he will have become a different kind of creature. All the same, *he* will continue to live. Contrast the following (5.13):

I am composed of the causal and the material. Neither of them will be destroyed and cease to be, just as neither came to be from what is not. So every part of *me* will be changed and assigned to become some part of the *world*. That, in turn, will change into some other part of the world, and so on forever.

Everything that now forms part of Marcus, including his soul, the active or ‘causal’ part of him, will still exist. But it will not exist unchanged; rather, after death his soul will become a part of the world, rather than a part of Marcus. So when we read Marcus saying that his ‘little portion of breath’ – the physical component of the soul, according to Stoicism – may undergo a transition and be set elsewhere (8.25), we should not assume that the ‘breath’ continues to be a part of Marcus, let alone that it is still Marcus himself. This illustrates how surveys of Stoic doctrines, so-called doxographies, such as that provided by Diogenes Laertius, and the questions they prioritize can flatten out important differences between Stoics. The doxographical reports about the Stoic afterlife become preoccupied with the question of the soul’s survival: which souls survive, and for how long? On that question there is not much difference between Seneca and Marcus: both are undecided. But Marcus is not sure that even the survival of his soul would carry his own existence into the future. And he sometimes states, with surprising firmness, that *he* will not survive his death: ‘soon you will be no one and nowhere, like Hadrian and Augustus’ (8.5; compare Epictetus 3.24.94, quoted on p. 157 above).

Marcus shares with other Stoics the view that what matters most, during life, is the character of one’s soul and its governing part, the aspect of ourselves by which we reason well or poorly. Marcus himself says that ‘everything’ is bound up in how you treat your mental governing part (12.33). Elsewhere he says that intellect alone (now distinguished from body and breath) is truly one’s own (12.3), inasmuch as its operations alone can become fully autonomous.³⁷ He quotes with approval Epictetus’ saying ‘you are a little soul supporting a corpse’ (4.41). His denial of personal survival after death is therefore all the more remarkable: the unique

³⁷ Compare 10.33.3.

importance of the soul or intellect during life does not (at least in 5.13) entail that its existence after death would provide the person himself or herself with a future. His desire for a 'naked' soul (10.1) has nothing to do with post-mortem survival; it is exclusively an ethical aspiration for his life, to attain a state in which his soul attaches the highest importance to its own character and reasoning.

What explains this uncertainty about the discarnate soul as bearer of personal identity after death? Part of the background is Marcus' view that parts of the world are subject to constant change and replacement. His thoughts on change, as well as the literary form of some parts of the *Meditations*, are strongly influenced by Heraclitus.³⁸ His Heracliteanism can find providential, rather than pessimistic, expression: the world renews itself through constant change, and if the world will last forever, it will do so by changing and replacing its parts (10.7.2).³⁹ This implies a sharp contrast between the world and its parts: 'presently the earth will cover us all, and then the earth itself will change; what results from that, and again what results from that, will change forever. Someone considering the wave upon wave of changes and alterations, and their speed, will look down upon everything mortal' (9.28). As a corporeal item, breath, our souls will have an intra-cosmic future, if they have a future at all after death – 'what dies does not fall outside the world' (8.18) – and so they too will be caught up in the maelstrom of constant change. Marcus' cosmology thus gives him reason to see the soul's future in terms of change and replacement rather than personal continuity. He himself draws a connection between the ubiquity of change in the world and the lack of a future for himself: 'in a short while you will be nobody, and nowhere, and so it will be with each of the things that you now see, and each person now alive. For all things are naturally such as to change, transform and be destroyed, so that other things may come to be in turn' (12.21).

Marcus' reflections on the part-whole relationship are also relevant. He describes people sometimes as a combination of two items, body and soul/intellect (2.17, 6.32, 7.66, 8.28, 11.3), elsewhere as a combination of three items, soul-breath, body and intellect (2.2, 3.16, 8.56, 12.3, 12.14).⁴⁰ This suggests that during his life the soul or intellect can be considered a part of him. But after his death the world, not Marcus, is the whole of which the soul will be a part (see 5.13, quoted on p. 170 above). Marcus' reasons for regarding the *world* as the relevant whole go beyond the obvious point that

³⁸ See, for example, the comparison of all reality to a river (5.23; compare 4.43, 6.15, 7.19).

³⁹ See Bénatouil 2013: 159. ⁴⁰ See Long 2012: 470; Sedley 2012.

the world will exist when the soul-body – or soul-intellect-body – composite no longer exists. The function of a discarnate soul should be understood in terms of the world and its interests, not Marcus and his interests: the soul no longer controls or considers Marcus' body, but rather by being changed will make a small contribution to sustaining the world. Like any Stoic, Marcus believes that the soul has a corporeal constitution, but his Heracliteanism has given him a particular view of the function of a separated soul that is not inevitable for a Stoic. If the only function of such a soul is through its changes to sustain the world, that is strong reason to regard the whole to which it belongs as the world.

This brings us to Marcus' evaluation of death. When he writes to forestall anxiety in himself about death, he sometimes uses Epicurean arguments: if death terminates his awareness, then he will be aware of no evil. But another approach is to let the above reflections on the soul and the world colour his attitude to himself, and his parts, during life. Not only will the soul be a part of the world after Marcus' death, but during life Marcus himself should regard it and his body as parts of the world: death separates 'elements of the world as well as elements of you' (8.18). Death can then be considered as a small case of the world changing its own parts for its own maintenance (5.8.3, 9.3.1). The question of whether death is an evil can thus be decided by a different and ultimately theological question: is the world the kind of system that sustains itself by harming its parts? Marcus believes that to be incompatible with providence: if the world is providentially designed, it cannot be harmful for 'the parts of the whole' to suffer the changes for which they are naturally constituted (10.7.1, compare 2.3, 10.6.1).⁴¹

It is important to appreciate that this last point applies to Marcus himself as well as to his parts. When Marcus suggests that his parts belong to the world, he does not mean to imply that during his life they are not also his parts, or that he is, during life, an illusory whole. (As we just saw, death is said at 8.18 to separate Marcus' own 'elements'.) He is a genuine whole, albeit one that is a temporary part of the world (10.6) and whose parts are themselves parts of the world. So when he asks whether the world's renewal is against the interests of its parts, and replies that this would be too large a failing by providence, *both* Marcus himself *and* his components are being considered as world-parts. Other passages of the *Meditations* make clear his intention to show, through the assumption of

⁴¹ For the socio-political counterpart see 5.22 (what does not harm the city does not harm the citizen), 6.54, 10.33.4.

divine providence, that death is not an evil for human beings (2.II, 12.5). Marcus is not urging himself to think exclusively in terms of the world and its interests, or suggesting that it somehow makes his own interests insignificant; rather, his approach is to show that his death contributes to the renewal of the world, and then to ask whether that is achieved at his own expense. This is an example of his more general aspiration 'to examine what sort of world it is, what service is rendered to it by each thing, what value it has for the whole, but also what value it has for the human being' (3.II.2).

6 Summary

The survey of Stoicism in Diogenes Laertius shows that early Stoics disagreed about whether all souls persist after death until the conflagration. Roman Stoics also disagree with one another about whether the separated soul bears the identity of the deceased person. In Seneca souls continue to bear personal identity if they persist after death; in Marcus Aurelius even this conditional is sometimes denied, because of his Heracliteanism and his view of the soul's function after death. In Stoic ethics, death belongs to a diverse group of items that human beings are naturally inclined to avoid. When Stoic authors relate death to other items within the group, such as illness and pain, death is not always the primary object of concern. Sometimes death is used to provide resilience against something else that most people fear, although Seneca suggests that eventually people should be able to face the hardships of life without drawing comfort from mortality.

Symmetry arguments, comparing non-existence before birth and after death, have been another theme of this chapter. They can be put forward by philosophers who are agnostic about the soul's continued existence after death. For Seneca an advantage of the Symmetry argument is the comparative simplicity of its premises; by contrast, the possibility of the soul's persistence after death is comforting only after some demanding inquiry into the soul's relationship with god and the cosmos. During the correspondence Seneca recognizes perspectives that would not be reconciled to death by the theory of an endlessly long-lived soul, whereas the Symmetry argument can be used on them. Plutarch uses a Symmetry argument within an agnostic framework that resembles the end of Plato's *Apology*. Finally, the *Axiochus* uses a Symmetry argument to address a particular view of personal identity, expressed earlier by Axiochus, according to which it is the body, even after death, that bears our identity.

*Suicide, Religion and the City***I Suicide, Gods and Society**

What is the best way to approach the subject of suicide in ancient philosophy? We could construct a survey of approval and disapproval by seeing which philosophers, or which texts, permitted suicide and which philosophers condemned it. That would be a useful exercise if the aim were to use philosophy to provide context for something else: for example, if the primary object of study were an ancient literary account of suicide, a survey of approval and disapproval in ancient philosophy would help guide and contextualize interpretation.¹ But although the questions philosophers ask about suicide are normative or ethical (e.g. when, if ever, is suicide appropriate?), this is not the best approach when the philosophy itself is what we want to understand.² Ancient philosophers did not simply deliver verdicts for or against suicide, and in some comparisons, such as between Plato and the Stoics (the philosophers who left some of the most interesting writing about suicide), drawing a contrast between approval and disapproval will not be very enlightening. Both Plato and the Stoics would say that the appropriateness of suicide depends on the circumstances. A better approach is to see which considerations were thought relevant to the person contemplating suicide, how exactly those considerations were formulated, and the contexts in which suicide was debated. In what follows I will focus on social, political and religious considerations. How should one's relationships with loved ones, the city and the gods bear on reasoning about suicide? The 'city' in the title thus stands for family and friends as

¹ Compare the way in which interpreters of Vergil's *Aeneid* and Aeneas' murderous outburst of anger at its end might consult attitudes to anger in Roman and Hellenistic philosophy.

² The philosophers discussed in this chapter show no interest in explaining, in a non-normative spirit, the rate or commonness of suicide within a society or group. Contrast Durkheim 1952, although near the end of his study Durkheim himself considers the right attitude for society to take towards suicide.

well as law and political authority. The philosophers with most to say about these considerations are Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics.³

It will be useful to have before us the range of ways in which gods and other human beings can figure in thoughts about suicide. Some of them are explored in the literary representations, or discussions, of suicide that were available to ancient philosophers. First, self-evaluation and thinking about our own interests and prospects – ‘how well is my life going?’ – will almost inevitably make reference to relationships with other people and (if we believe in them) with the gods. Nearly always, we hope, these thoughts will be reassuring. But a sufficiently severe crisis in interpersonal relations, or the prospect of one, may make suicide seem attractive. That is the position in which the hero Ajax finds himself in Sophocles’ play: there is no group with whom he could happily coexist. Ajax has attempted to murder the leaders of the Greek army and cannot endure the mockery that (he believes) his failed attempt will bring on him. He is hated by the gods, and he has no social alternative to the Greek army (*Ajax* 457–66): the Trojans, his enemies, would hardly welcome him, and he cannot face returning prematurely to his own family back home, especially his father, Telamon. These thoughts about family and society have a crucial bearing on his decision to take his life, although, as we will soon see, there is more to say about it. Euripides’ *Heracles* similarly believes that there is no city where he can live, and one of the first things Theseus does to dissuade him from suicide is to offer him a place to live in Athens (*Heracles* 1281–98, 1326–33).

Secondly, the interests of other people, and obligations to them (or, again for believers, to the gods), may provide someone with reasons against suicide or even, in rare circumstances, for it. We would probably think most immediately of those who need our care, such as children and elderly parents. Even inflexible, hard-hearted Ajax thinks these considerations relevant. He is aware that his death will have serious consequences for his parents and son, and Sophocles makes it quite obvious that it will also have consequences for his concubine Tecmessa; this does not prevent Ajax from committing suicide, but he does try to provide some measure of care for his parents and son after he is gone (560–71). Cicero contemplated suicide when compelled to leave Rome in 58 BC, but, according to his own account,

³ In Epicureanism, suicide is mentioned when describing a perverse or self-defeating psychological condition, such as a fear of death that causes one eventually to seek death (Lucretius 3.79–82). But the Epicureans permit suicide in some circumstances (Cicero *On Moral Ends* 1.49): their opposition is to poorly motivated suicide, not to suicide as such. For further discussion, see Englert 1994; Cooper 1999: 536–7.

he decided to stay alive because of his duties to the Republic (*Pro Sestio* 47, 49, 50).⁴ We have just seen social or political reasons to stay alive; in special circumstances political obligations may present someone with a reason to die. Of course, for male citizens there may often be an obligation to risk death by going to war, but occasionally there may be an obligation actually to bring about death. Another male suicide in Greek tragedy, Menoeceus, kills himself in order to protect his city from an invasion. He has overheard a prophecy that the attack on his city will be defeated only if he is sacrificed, and chooses to make the sacrifice by his own hand. To preserve his own life would be, as he says, to betray his family and city (Euripides *Phoenician Women* 911–59, 991–1018).

Thirdly, our relationships with other people and the gods may be such that they have partial or even total ownership of the decision. Here the obligation is not to die or stay alive because of someone else's interests, or because of their bearing on one's own interests, but to involve them, or defer to them, in the decision.⁵ If it is the gods, not other people, to whom the agent must defer, then we might think that this will in practice amount to a ban on suicide. But it need not: the level of restriction implied by deference to the gods depends to a large degree on our confidence about receiving signs from the gods, and the frequency with which gods are thought to communicate with human beings. Both of these vary from culture to culture. If the gods hardly ever communicate with human beings, and if we should not commit suicide without some mark of divine approval, then we should almost never commit suicide. Usually the only sign that death is appropriate is death itself. By contrast, in Greek and Roman cultures, where oracles, divination and omens are assumed to be genuine and authoritative parts of religious experience, consulting the gods and receiving guidance from them are real possibilities. So while the need for divine approval may appear severely restrictive, we need to take into account other theological beliefs in the culture or the philosophy. This will be important for understanding Plato's *Phaedo* and its legacy in later philosophy: when Socrates allows for suicide in the event of a divine 'sign' (see [section 2](#) below), this is a larger concession than we might suppose. The tragic figures mentioned above are, by this measure, extremely isolated. Menoeceus gets his father Creon to leave before announcing before the chorus his reasons to kill himself (*Phoenician Women* 991–1018).

⁴ We may of course suspect the accuracy of this, but his letters to his friend Atticus (3.3, 3.4, 3.7 = 47, 49, 52 Shackleton Bailey) suggest that he did indeed come close to suicide at this time, although he suggests there that it was the loyal Atticus who pulled him back from the brink.

⁵ For this distinction, compare Dworkin 1994: 190–6.

The chorus is present, but his father, one of the people most obviously affected by the fact, is not, even though Menoeceus says that his father is one of the people for whom he intends to die (1003). The decision to commit suicide belongs narrowly to Ajax and Menoeceus, even though their thoughts about other people are central to their decisions.

There are other concerns closely related to that of shared ownership of the decision. Some would deny that there is any need to involve other people in the decision, but even a very severe believer in personal autonomy may recognize a need to inform loved ones about the decision. As we might say, they deserved better than to hear about it after the event. And in some situations, other people, doctors or relatives, have to be involved in the act, not only the decision, when the suicide is, as we now put it, 'assisted'. Establishing whether this is different from murder is a major concern in current philosophy and law, but it is not treated as a topic of special interest in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, even though there are examples of assisted suicide in ancient biographies. Usually in these literary passages the author uses assisted suicide – or attempts by the would-be suicide to get assistance – to show the resolve of the person close to death and to contrast it with either the fearfulness or the affection and loyalty of the people around him.⁶ Assisted suicide has special interest as an index of character, or (as two people are involved) of contrasting characters. A contrast between the calm, resolute dying person and his grieving family or friends has a long tradition and is shown particularly powerfully at the end of Plato's *Phaedo*, but the contrast is even more powerful, or poignant, if the friend or relative has to help bring about the death.

2 *The Phaedo on Suicide and the Gods*

One of Socrates' most famous claims is that the unexamined life is not worth living (*Apology* 38a), and this might be thought to have a bearing on suicide. In the context, Socrates is considering not suicide but leading some other life – with less philosophy and less self-scrutiny – and explaining why he refuses to live that way. In fact, he does not simply declare that the unexamined life is not worth living: he is drawing attention to the difficulty for him of convincing the jury that this really is one of his reasons for refusing to live without philosophy. He mentions life and, by implication,

⁶ See Plutarch *Brutus* 52. In Plutarch's account, Cato's son and doctor try to impede, not assist, his suicide, but Cato eventually gets his way (*Cato the Younger* 68–70). Zadorojnyi 2007 argues that Plutarch represents Cato's suicide in such a way as to criticize Stoicism.

death because his own life is now at stake: whatever reasons he has for continuing with philosophy need to be weighed against the threat of the death sentence. He meets that demand by indicating that, in his view, hard as it may be for his jurors to believe, avoiding the death sentence that way would leave him with a life not worth living for a human being. The choice in the passage is not between suicide and further life, but between avoiding execution, by renouncing his philosophical discussions, and risking the death penalty, by refusing to renounce them. So it has to be stressed that the passage is not really about suicide. All the same, the passage seems to imply a particular, and extraordinarily narrow, view of what makes a life worth continuing: there must be philosophical discussion and critical inspection of the life being lived.⁷ Later Socratics, such as the Cynics and Stoics, will disagree about whether their shared commitment to the items especially prized by Socrates (philosophy, virtue and knowledge) actually implies that those items and those items alone make a life worth living, and that suicide is appropriate in their absence. But that is not the question Plato raises when he considers suicide directly. When in the *Phaedo* Plato makes suicide itself the object of scrutiny, it is the more broadly recognized questions of religious and political obligations that occupy attention, not Socrates' famous slogan about the unexamined life.

In Plato's *Phaedo* it is not clear how sharply Socrates' death should be distinguished from suicide.⁸ Socrates is executed on the city's orders, but he administers the poison by his own hand, and he has turned down an opportunity to escape prison and avoid execution. Socrates has not sought death, but he has accepted the death sentence and submitted to it when given a chance to escape; furthermore, as we will see, Socrates is said to be under the kind of 'compulsion' or 'necessity' that makes suicide acceptable (62c). But my aim in what follows is to understand what Socrates says about suicide, not to determine whether or not his own death counts as suicide. Near the start of the conversation with his friends, Socrates discusses whether bringing about one's own death contravenes obligations to the gods.⁹ His interlocutor Cebes has heard other people forbidding suicide, and among them is the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus. But so

⁷ Compare [Plato] *Cleitophon* 408a-b.

⁸ See Frey 1978; Lesser 1980; Smith 1980. I have learned much from the unpublished PhD thesis of Colin Higgins.

⁹ In the Greek, they discuss whether 'killing oneself', or 'treating oneself violently', is *θαιμρός* (61c9-e6). Suicide is marked not with a single Greek word but a phrase, although in Hellenistic and later Greek, especially in Stoicism, the word *ἐξαγωγή*, 'exiting' life or 'releasing' yourself from life, can be used to mean 'suicide'. This may show the influence of Antisthenes, if the quotation of him at Athenaeus 157b is genuine.

far Cebes has not heard a clear explanation of the prohibition. Even Philolaus had nothing clear to offer on the subject. Socrates has said that philosophers would welcome death (61c-d), and this makes the prohibition on suicide look very peculiar: if it is better, at least for some people, to be dead than alive, why must they wait for an external benefactor, instead of benefiting themselves (62a)?¹⁰

In response, Socrates offers two rationales, but he rests his case only on the second. The first consideration is deemed too ‘large’ (62b) to get a clear view of: we human beings are in prison (or, in another possible translation, a garrison), and must not escape from it. The second thought, which he finds easier to endorse and apply, is that we stand in a certain relationship with the gods: we are owned by them, or we are their ‘property’ or ‘possession’. The Greek word for ‘property’ or ‘possession’, κτήμα, can be used of slaves (Euripides *Medea* 49, Xenophon *Ways and Means* 4.42, Aristotle *Politics* 1253b32). (Socrates also says that the gods care for us, but he relies on the relationship of ownership in his argument.) He draws an analogy with human ownership of slaves: if a slave killed himself, and his master had not given a sign that he wanted the slave to be dead,¹¹ the master would be angry and (if he could) inflict punishment (62c). Gods would take a similar view of unauthorized human suicide, and (Socrates does not spell this out) unlike human owners the gods really can inflict punishment after the event. This assumes that something of the human being survives the suicide to be an object of divine punishment, but the arguments for the immortality of the soul will establish precisely that. The threat of divine punishment addresses the concern about our interests: early death would not really be in the suicide’s interests if there will be punishment for him or her after death.

The reference to the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus (61e) has been taken to show that Socrates is explaining a Pythagorean ban on suicide without expressing a definite commitment of his own.¹² But there is solid textual evidence for attributing to Socrates the entire argument about the gods, from its premises to its conclusion. As we have seen, Socrates mentions two justifications for the ban on suicide. The first, over-large explanation – we are in a prison or garrison – is indeed kept at a distance by Socrates. But the second rationale is based on the claim that we are owned by the gods, and Socrates himself endorses that claim explicitly (62b).¹³

¹⁰ The meaning of the text is disputed here. See Gallop 1975: 79–83.

¹¹ The Greek suggests that a master who gave such a signal had in mind the outcome, being dead, not (or not so directly) the process of dying. I owe this point to Rowett (*forthcoming*).

¹² See Cooper 1999: 521–23. ¹³ Cooper himself notes this (1999: 522).

This view of the god–human relationship is reaffirmed by him later in the dialogue, when he claims that he himself is a slave of Apollo (85b).¹⁴ As for the conclusion of the argument, it does not fully agree with the Pythagorean view, as the latter is presented in the dialogue. The Pythagorean Philolaus is reported as saying simply that people should not commit suicide (61e). But that is not the position Socrates reaches: he says that suicide is inappropriate unless one receives a sign from the gods, such as the ‘necessity’ or ‘compulsion’ that he now faces (62c). His view of gods as our owners thus leads to a more nuanced position: unlike Philolaus, who holds, so far as we can tell, that people should never commit suicide, Socrates suggests that there are circumstances where suicide is *not* impious. He is qualifying the Pythagorean ban, in the light of his own theological views, not merely trying to make sense of it.¹⁵

Socrates’ talk of a ‘necessity’ might encourage a different reading of the passage: when people face *inevitably* imminent death, such as in terminal illness, a divine sign may cause them to accept it and not try to postpone it.¹⁶ On this reading, the passage does not permit suicide, but shows the right attitude to death when it is bound to happen soon anyway. But the comparison with slaves tells against such a reading. Socrates does not describe a slave encouraged by his master to accept inevitable death; rather, the slave is said explicitly to have ‘killed himself’ (62c2). The question is whether the master had indicated that he wanted the slave to be dead; a master who had not given a ‘sign’ would be angry. The point about a ‘sign’ allows for a scenario where a slave has killed himself and the master, having given a sign, is not angry. As the master stands for the gods, Socrates is allowing for a case of suicide where the gods have given the relevant sign – and so he is indeed allowing for suicides that do not contravene religious obligations. This leaves unresolved the nature of the ‘necessity’, but I return to that question below.

It is remarkable to find an argument on suicide that refers only to a theological consideration. On the face of it there is no recognition that

¹⁴ Compare Plato *Laws* 902b and 906a.

¹⁵ Cooper 1999: 523 cites Socrates’ words to Cebes at 62a (‘maybe it seems surprising to you if it is impious for these people to benefit themselves [by committing suicide], but they must wait for someone else to be their benefactor’) and suggests that they stress ‘in advance the tentativeness with which he entertains the idea, whether on those grounds or on others, that suicide is never justified’. But this initial explanation of why Cebes is puzzled by the ban on suicide does not bar Socrates from reaching his own conclusion about suicide, and in fact Socrates’ argument will reject the idea that suicide is never justified. To quote Gallop (1975: 85), ‘Socrates is not maintaining an absolute veto upon suicide.’

¹⁶ I thank a reader for Cambridge University Press for suggesting this alternative.

other human beings, or the city and its welfare or laws, should sometimes affect reasoning about suicide. The claim that must be justified is that suicide is not ‘divinely sanctioned’,¹⁷ at least without a divine sign, but it was Socrates, not his interlocutor, who chose to express the point that way (61c-d). But this silence about social and political concerns is not as significant as we might think. To begin with a simple but important point about the context, the opening challenge to Socrates was to defend his equanimity in the face of imminent death, and he meets that challenge by arguing that some part of him will survive death and have greater understanding, especially of Forms, after death. Plato is under no illusion that everybody will find this an exciting prospect, but philosophers should (he thinks) be drawn to it. So he needs urgently to address the question of whether a philosopher should hasten his death, and if not, why not. (Of course, the argument against suicide applies to everyone, not just philosophers, but non-philosophers have not been given a reason to regard death as attractive.)¹⁸ Given that he is giving all philosophers, regardless of their city, social status and social relations, a reason to welcome death, he needs an argument that will apply to philosophers of any city and any social position. It is not enough to give an argument that depends on the laws of a particular city, or on their obligations as a parent or councillor, as those will be irrelevant in some cases. An argument about our relationship with the gods has the general application that he needs.

Furthermore, we need not suppose that Plato is denying the importance or relevance of social or political ties. This becomes clearer when we think more closely about the claim that human beings are the property of the gods. The word ‘property’ is potentially misleading, as it suggests something lifeless and inactive, such as furniture or money. Instead of these Socrates has in mind human property, and precisely because that concept is deeply alien or repellent to us it becomes urgent for us, when trying to understand the passage, to do all we can to take it seriously. Slavery is a term of thematic importance in the *Phaedo*, as the body-soul relationship is described in terms of slavery and emancipation (66d).¹⁹ It is thus appropriate to press the description of humans as slaves and see what else it implies, as long as that is supported by other passages in the dialogue.

¹⁷ See n.9.

¹⁸ ‘Not committing suicide is prescribed for all, not only for philosophers, but also for every human being’ (Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Phaedo*, ed. Westerink, 1.12).

¹⁹ The verb used to describe the separation of soul from body, ἀπαλλάσσομαι, can be used of release from slavery (Herodotus 1.170; Thucydides 5.100). For fuller discussion, see Kamen 2013, which interprets Socrates’ last words, where he speaks of a debt to Asclepius, as a reference to manumission.

Nobody has a slave without intending that slave to perform some work. This applies to metaphorical slavery as well: when Socrates says that we are ‘slaves to the maintenance of the body’ (66d), he means that the body demands of us that we take certain actions: feeding, clothing and sheltering the body, and so on. So the claim that we are slaves of the gods ought to suggest that the gods give us tasks and functions.²⁰ That implication is confirmed by the text, for shortly before this passage Socrates has provided an example: during his life he has been commanded in a dream to make music and apply himself to that job (60e), and (at least until he came to prison) he has interpreted that as a divine command to pursue philosophy.

There is, however, a difference between divine masters and human masters.²¹ Unlike human masters, the gods do not derive benefit from the actions of their slaves; the beneficiaries are rather human beings, such as Socrates and his companions. As the *Phaedo* itself illustrates, Socrates’ philosophizing was often undertaken collaboratively, and in this particular dialogue he convinces his friends – or at least Cebes – that the soul is immortal. Similarly in the *Apology* Socrates takes himself to have received a divine command to expose the ignorance of other people, and believes that the beneficiaries of that action are other human beings, not the god himself. His ‘service’ to the god (23b-c, 30a) is, he says, the greatest benefit that the Athenians have received (30a). The Platonic examples we are given of service to the gods – Socrates’ philosophizing in the *Phaedo*, and Socrates’ mission to Athens in the *Apology* – suggest that the gods promote human interests by provoking interaction between humans. In the famous image of the *Apology*, god in his concern for the Athenians sent Socrates as a gadfly (31a). If so, then the person charged with the task of questioning should not abandon that task prematurely, such as by committing suicide. Socrates may thus have an obligation to stay alive because he can, by obeying a divine command, advance the interests of other people – in this dialogue, his friends – and that is an obligation to the gods even though the gods themselves will not be benefited by his actions. This shows the importance of distinguishing between the people (or, as here, gods) to whom the agent defers, and the people whose *interests* are relevant.

I have suggested that the belief in divine ownership – not just of the decision but of the human being who faces the decision – implies further views about divinely imposed functions and activity, and in the broader

²⁰ Compare the train of thought at *Euthyphro* 13d-e. The suggestion that we offer the gods service, as slaves to masters, invites the following question: what task do we perform for them?

²¹ Warren 2001b explores a tension between the gods as our owners and the gods as our benefactors or supervisors.

context of Plato's writing about Socrates' religiosity, it suggests activity beneficial to other human beings. It is now time to consider what Socrates says about the cases where suicide is sanctioned by a divine sign. Socrates is famously creative in his interpretation of divine signs and has a habit of interpreting divine statements as if they were imperatives. For example, in the *Apology* the god did not actually give Socrates an order. He told Socrates' friend that nobody is wiser than Socrates (21a). All the same, Socrates interprets that first as a denigration of human wisdom (23a-b), but then as a command for him to show other people that they are ignorant (23b, 29d). Similarly in the *Crito* Socrates is told that he will die imminently – or, in the poetic wording of the dream, that he will soon come to Phthia (44a-b), a quotation of *Iliad* 9.363 – and interprets that as a divine command to remain in prison. 'This is how the god is leading', as he says at the end of the dialogue (54e). If we set aside Socrates' divine voice, the *Phaedo* is rather unusual in showing Socrates actually receiving a command, in the form of an imperative, from the gods (60e). Elsewhere he interprets statements as commands. This suggests that the 'sign' from the gods that suicide is either permitted or demanded need not be expressed as a command to die.²²

Socrates gives as an example of a divine sign the 'necessity' or 'compulsion' that he now faces. At first sight this is odd wording: by raising the ethics of suicide, we might think, the passage is presupposing that the person has a *choice* between suicide and further life. There is presumably a reference to his trial and condemnation,²³ but in what sense does this constitute a necessity? Plato cannot mean that Socrates was left with no way of postponing death. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates is given and turns down an opportunity to escape prison, and in the *Phaedo* Plato refers back to this refused offer when Socrates says that the reasons why he is currently in prison are, first, that the Athenians thought it better to condemn him, and secondly that for this reason – that is, because he was found guilty – he thought it better to remain and more just to submit to their penalty. Otherwise he would have fled to Megara or Boeotia (98e-99a). So the necessity on Socrates does not depend only on the jurors' verdict and choice of the death penalty; it depends also on Socrates' own view about the correct response to condemnation. The combination of his beliefs and circumstances makes Socrates regard only one option (staying in prison

²² Compare Warren 2001b: 100. For the influence on Stoic suicides (or at least biographical accounts of Stoic suicides), see also Sedley 1993.

²³ At *Crito* 46d he says that he now 'must die'.

and being executed) as worth choosing. This may seem a strange notion of necessity, but it is famously present in the *Republic* (347b-d, 500d, 520a-521b), where those most qualified for political power are both required to rule, with a 'necessity' imposed on them, and willing to rule. Here too the necessity is not independent of their beliefs or values: they think it just for them to take up political office, as they owe it to the city, and, in the initial formulation in Book I, they do not want to be ruled by someone less qualified for rule than they are. Circumstances are such that the only way to avoid that, and to behave justly, is for them to take up office themselves. Similarly in the *Phaedo*, the gods can deliver as a sign some 'necessity' whose force depends on the agent's views of just behaviour, in Socrates' case as a citizen of Athens.²⁴

The *Phaedo* is sometimes mocking or disrespectful to Athenian political authorities (85b), and there is a contrast between divine and merely political authority when in the myth it is said that souls will be judged in the afterlife (107e, 113d, 114b). Plato hardly needs to emphasize the contrast between these judges and the jurors here on earth, or specifically in Athens.²⁵ So it is worth emphasizing all the more that obligations as a citizen are not made unimportant by the theological language in which suicide is discussed. As a citizen of Athens, the condemned Socrates had to stay in his prison, where death will soon come to him.

3 Suicide, Punishment and the City in Plato's *Laws*

In Plato's *Laws* the main speaker, the Athenian visitor, outlines the social institutions, legislation and government of a new colony, Magnesia. Plato develops this fictional programme in extraordinary detail, and makes extensive use of existing legislation and religious attitudes in Athens and elsewhere. Many of the laws have recognizable counterparts in Athens. On the other hand, there is supposed to be something different about this legislation: Plato is trying to show how to think about legislation, and the rationale of punishment, in detachment from the usual turbulence of political events. The speakers agree that usually legislation is carried out in the face of a crisis that allows for no delay, whereas their procedure is different and is all the better for being considered and leisurely (858b-c).

²⁴ 'How can there be a "necessity" that could be avoided? Well, the necessity of goodness is the greatest kind, and how could Socrates commit injustice, especially against his own homeland?' (Damascius, *Commentary on the Phaedo*, ed. Westerink, 1.24).

²⁵ The contrast is made more directly in *Apology* 41a.

In Book 9, the visitor offers very brief and compressed remarks on suicide and suggests that in some cases, but not all, the bodies of suicides are to be punished after death. Suicide is treated in one of several appendices to the punishment of homicide, and it is now considered from the point of view of lawgivers and officials, not that of the person contemplating suicide. The question they are considering is not 'is suicide right or wrong?' but 'when, and how, should the city punish suicide after the event?' The fact that the context is a discussion of punishment by the city, not of correct action, needs to be emphasized. We may disapprove of actions but still think that lawgivers should not formulate punishments for them. Sometimes this depends on a distinction between the domestic or private and the public, but it need not: for example, if punishing an action would not deter people from it and would have an unwelcome effect that greatly outweighs the benefit of punishing it, then there is a case for not punishing it, even if we disapprove of it. The distinction between punishment and disapproval does not depend on a particular – and possibly anachronistic – distinction between the public and the private.

When the visitor says that, in some cases, suicide should not be punished, we should not draw the inference that in those cases the suicide deserves no disapproval at all, let alone that in all those cases suicide was, uniquely, the appropriate action.²⁶ The claim is merely that there should be no punishment. There is a risk of neglecting the political or specifically penal context when we compare this section of the *Laws* with the *Phaedo* and Stoic ethics. One further difference that the political context makes is the following: in a discussion of the ethics of suicide it would be enough to show that, in some cases, suicide was the wrong choice. But in this context that is not enough. In order to explain and justify punishment, the visitor needs to show why it is the business of the city to intervene after a suicide.

The fact that suicide is treated in an appendix to homicide might suggest that Plato wants to use the killing of one person by another, and the extended discussion of its punishment, to shed light on suicide. That is highly questionable, particularly if one holds, as Aristotle would later argue (see the [next section](#)), that there is no such thing as committing injustice against oneself: according to Aristotle, as we will shortly see, injustice necessarily involves one person or group inflicting harm on some other person or group, and so in suicide the deceased cannot be said to be the

²⁶ Contrast Cooper 1999: 523 ('in the *Laws* Plato is quite explicit about the permissibility, and indeed the moral advisability, of suicides under certain circumstances'). This is true of 854c, but is less certain concerning the longer discussion at 873c-d.

victim of his own injustice. From this Aristotelian perspective, it would be misleading to treat suicide as a variant of homicide, for in some (probably most) homicides the deceased person really is a victim of injustice. But despite the location of the passage, Plato is not unaware that there are differences between murder and suicide. At first it sounds as if suicide will indeed be treated as a kind of murder, murder even worse than murdering close members of one's family. The Athenian has just been talking, with distaste and reluctance, about murderers of near relatives, and there has been a kind of crescendo leading up to these particularly horrific murders. The Athenian starts with involuntary or accidental homicide (865a-866d), and works up to homicide committed in anger (866d-869e) or with premeditation (869e-872c), and finally, most terrible of all, the premeditated homicide of members of one's family (872c-873b). When he introduces suicide, the note of severity at first rings even more loudly: the Athenian asks what punishment should be given to the man who kills the person closest to himself – that is, suicides (873c). But then the suicide's body is treated differently from that of homicides, and more leniently than that of the worst homicides. The visitor has distinguished between various kinds of homicide, and those guilty of homicide are separated from the city's territory for a period that depends on the psychological profile of their crime – involuntary homicides, and those who acted out of madness or some other illness, are exiled only for a year (864e, 865e), those who killed in anger are exiled for two or three years (867c-d), and those guilty of premeditated homicide are executed (871d). Then after death their bodies are permanently separated from the city's territory and may not be buried there (871d, 874b; compare the punishment of murderers of close relatives at 873b).²⁷ Suicides are treated differently: the suicides whose bodies are subject to penalties are buried within the city's borders, but in isolated places and without any indication of the name of the deceased (873d).²⁸ The bodies of suicides are thus isolated inside the city's territory and denied recognition in it, rather than separated from it altogether. So in the penalties for suicide Plato has not after all used the punishment inflicted on the bodies of murderers.

We have to look earlier in the account of homicide to see why. The visitor has underlined the seriousness of homicide by means of a legend that the dead victim continues to be angry at the murderer after death

²⁷ In ancient Athens sacrilege was punished by death without burial (Saunders 1990: 73 n.39). See also the punishment for treason mentioned in Thucydides 1.138.6.

²⁸ The usual regulations concerning tombstones are set out at 958e.

(865d-e). This story then requires the person guilty of homicide to be separated from the land, at least for some time (865e). It is hard to be sure how strongly Plato is committing himself to that story about the wrath of the dead, but we can recognize in it the thought that retaining the murderer within the community, and in some cases retaining the murderer's body after death, is disrespectful to the victim. In a suicide, by contrast, there is no distinction between killer and killed that allows one to be separated, after death, from the other: a person cannot be buried separately from himself or herself. That at least is what the visitor assumes, but it is worth noting that – according to one passage of Aeschines (3.244)²⁹ – in Athenian law the hand of a suicide was to be buried separately from the rest of the body, thereby separating the corpse from the part of it that carried out the deed. In the *Laws* the description of the suicide as the murderer of his own closest relative effects a neat rhetorical transition from the murder of parents to suicide, but it does not actually control the relative severity of punishment, and, despite the location of the passage, the punishment of suicides is different from that of any murderer.

After that introduction, the passage on suicide falls into two parts: first the visitor isolates the cases of suicide that should be punished, those committed out of 'cowardice' or 'laziness', and then describes the appropriate punishment. One type of case that apparently calls for no punishment is where the city has, in a trial, required the person to kill himself.³⁰ Even if the person had not been instructed to commit suicide, there should be no punishment if the suicide was caught up in social disgrace that made his life intolerable, or if some severe pain or distress³¹ had befallen him. The visitor is very vague about these cases, whereas we might have preferred him to be specific about whether the distress is that of, say, physical pain or bereavement, and whether the disgrace derived from the person's own actions or those of a relative. But Plato may regard those distinctions as a distraction: his vagueness suggests that what matters is not the character or source of the pain or disgrace, but simply its severity. Nobody should be punished if he could not endure shame, pain or distress that was this severe.

²⁹ Compare Josephus *The Jewish War* 3.8.5, 378.

³⁰ This would fit the treatment of Socrates' execution as a form of suicide. In the rest of the penal legislation, the Athenian does not mention enforced suicide as a penalty; his wording is usually to call the penalty 'death' (see, for example, 869c, 877b-c, 938c). When trying to impress upon citizens the horror of sacrilege, he says that it would be better to kill oneself than commit it (854c), but this falls short of actually ordering someone to commit suicide.

³¹ The adjective used to mark the painfulness of the condition (περιώδυνος) need not be taken to refer narrowly to physical pain. The cognate noun is used elsewhere in the *Laws* (732c) to mark a cause of weeping, and this presumably includes mental distress.

There is no suggestion in the text that the pain, distress or shame must reflect, or derive from, some moral vice in the person who committed suicide; the visitor is excusing from punishment suicides motivated by morally neutral conditions.³² To repeat, this falls short of saying that suicide is actually appropriate in this kind of dire situation, and it certainly falls short of saying that suicide *alone* is appropriate.

Suicides who lack this stimulus should be punished as having acted as their own judge and executioner – they have, according to the visitor, imposed on themselves ‘an unjust penalty’ (873c). This extraordinary use of judicial language refers back to the cases where there has been a proper trial and sentence. At this point we are likely to object that there are important differences between the mindset of a judge and that of a suicide. In this new colony, Magnesia, judges are required to consider, before they execute a criminal, whether the criminal’s life is worth living, and they may execute only if further life is not in the criminal’s interests (862e–863a). Inasmuch as there is consideration of whether the life is worth living, there is a resemblance between the deliberation of the judge and that of the suicide. But the judges are also required to consider the deterrent effect of the execution, and there is unlikely to be an analogue for that in the case of the suicide. That objection rather misses the point: Plato does not say that there is something resembling a *proper* trial, or the attitude of a *good* judge, in a suicide: the suicide’s trial or penalty is said to be unjust. What he needs to defend is the city’s intervention, and to defend that he suggests that the individual has arrogated a task that belongs to the city.

The visitor then turns to the punishment. One important restriction on punishment in Magnesia is that its objective must be both good and prospective: punishment aims to reform the criminal, and so benefit him, and to deter others from similar crimes (854d–855a, 862e–863a, 934a–b).³³ In the case of suicide, the punishment must be explained in terms of benefit to others, as nothing can be done, at least by the city, to help the dead person himself. The effect of the punishment is to restrict the family in their burial of the deceased. There are restrictions in every burial on how much effort and expense can be used to commemorate the dead person (958c–960b). In the case of suicide, the restrictions are tighter: no person may be buried together with the deceased, and there may be no commemoration of their life or even name (873d). We can only speculate about

³² Cooper 1999: 525–6 makes this aspect of the contrast between Plato and Stoics too stark.

³³ The principles behind pollution and purification are, however, different, and refer to the status of the victim. See below.

the rationale for this, but a constraint on any interpretation is that, given what the visitor says elsewhere, the punishment must somehow benefit, and in this case the beneficiaries must be other people. Probably the disgrace that is attached to the suicide is intended to deter others from emulating him, for the visitor explains elsewhere that disgrace is intended to have a deterrent effect (855a). One further effect of the restriction is that the family are prevented from indicating, and so telling others, that the person acted *correctly* in committing suicide. Again, Plato is considering the extent to which the city should concern itself with the body of a suicide, given that usually burial is left to the family, and he believes that the city is not overreaching itself in considering how the treatment of the suicide's body will affect what other citizens do.

Purification is an important component in the punishment of homicide, but the Athenian does not say whether the bodies of suicides need to be purified from religious pollution. He does not so much as mention purification in cases where the dead person was commanded by the city to commit suicide, or where life was made intolerable by pain or disgrace. But when he turns to suicides committed out of 'cowardice' or 'laziness', he says that 'god knows what the rules should be about purification and burial practice', and he tells relatives to consult religious experts as well as laws. His silence about the first cases and then his failure to give guidance of his own about the second group are unusual: in other parts of the penal legislation he feels qualified to say when citizens or slaves should be considered polluted, and whether they should purify themselves (see e.g. 868a, 871a). So this is not typical deference to a separate sphere of expertise. The Athenian is marking suicide as a particularly difficult case to judge, at least for the purposes of purification. There may be nothing more to this than the obvious practical difficulty: normally polluted people are still alive and so able to seek out and participate in the appropriate rituals, whereas after a suicide this is of course impossible. But it might be thought that by alluding to purification in some suicides but not all he points to a moral distinction: perhaps his initial silence about purification is meant to indicate that the first group of suicides, such as that committed in order to end unbearable pain, do not deserve any moral disapproval.³⁴

It thus becomes important to understand the place of purification in the rest of his penal legislation. When the Athenian legislates about homicide, the need for purification does not depend on the moral character of the

³⁴ My thanks to Peter Woodward for raising this point.

agent. Somebody who kills *accidentally*, such as during weapons practice, must still purify himself (831a, 865a-b, 866c), even though the Athenian has stated explicitly that unintentional harms are not acts of injustice (862a). Harming someone is not an act of injustice if it does not derive from some moral vice on the part of the agent (862b, 864a). Purification, in the case of accidental deaths, looks not to the character of the agent but to the status of the victim. If the victim has somehow forfeited his grounds for complaint or resentment, then the person who killed him need not be purified. People lose this status when they attempt, or commit, violence, theft or rape: there is no need for purification when someone kills to defend themselves, their property or members of their family (869d, 874b-d), or to avenge a relative murdered by a slave (868b).³⁵

This suggests that when the Athenian touches on purification after suicide, he has in mind not the moral character of suicides as agents but their status as the victim, or (in the technical sense) patient, of the action. When the city requires a criminal to commit suicide, and when someone's life has truly ceased to be worth living, then he or she has no grounds to complain about being killed. But this is not so clearly the case when someone prematurely terminates a life that was still worth living. There is now a disparity between the fact of the matter – the person's life was worth living, and so there are grounds for complaint or resentment – and the mindset or belief shown by the action. It might be thought that the city should give greater weight to the latter: in such cases, clearly people believe that they have little, or even nothing, to lose by dying, or somehow become blind to the real value of their lives. But the interpersonal parallel suggests otherwise: when judging homicide, the city does not defer to the judgement of the dead person, but looks simply to his or her real status. People killed when violently attacking others may believe themselves to have grounds for complaint, but in fact they do not, and so there is no need for purification when they are killed by their intended victims. So when, in the discussion of suicide, the Athenian shows uncertainty in specific cases, this may indeed be significant, but not by indicating contrasting moral judgements on the suicidal person. It reflects rather the competing claims, for the suicide as victim, of the objective value of the life, which demands purification, and the suicide's own self-evaluation.

³⁵ For the parallels in Athenian law concerning homicide in self-defence or defence of family, see MacDowell 1963: 75–7 and Saunders 1991: 244–9; for parallels concerning accidental homicide see MacDowell 1963: 73–4 and Saunders 1991: 243–4.

I have emphasized the religious and political context of the discussion of suicide in the *Laws* in order to avoid presenting the passage – together with the passage from the *Phaedo* – as if they were simply the Platonic counterparts to Stoic discussions of suicide. Context matters, and Stoicism puts suicide in a very different context. Starting with Zeno himself (Diogenes Laertius 7.4), Stoics pioneered a new genre, the treatise *On appropriate action*, whose best surviving representative is Cicero's *De Officiis*. A discussion of suicide in this genre will of course consider, from the point of view of the individual agent, which circumstances make suicide the appropriate action. By contrast, in the *Laws* Plato considers a set of questions that Stoicism never took so seriously: what should be done with the body of the deceased, and how should the city intervene in such a way as to deter other people from unnecessary suicide? Stoics would consider political or social reasons for or against suicide, but they say much less about the political or social aftermath of a suicide.

4 Aristotle on Suicide and the Coherence of Injustice

Aristotle's discussion of suicide is found in the fifth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The backdrop is a distinction between *broad* and *narrow* senses of justice and injustice. Justice in the narrow sense is a particular virtue, coordinate with other virtues such as courage and generosity. Like them, it has its own particular province of concerns, part of which is the distribution of goods. It is a challenge for Aristotle to square justice in the narrow sense with his account of other virtues (for example, can he really hold that it is a mean between two vices?), and usually scholarship on Aristotelian justice is drawn to those difficulties.³⁶ But it is justice in the broad sense that is relevant to us. Justice in this sense is not limited to the distribution of goods or administering punishment; rather, it is exercised whenever a virtuous act expresses a sense of what is owed to other people. For example, a soldier who stands his ground in combat is brave, but he is also just, in the broad sense, when he acts out of a sense of what he owes to his fellow soldiers, or his commanders, or the non-combatants at home. A soldier who abandons his post is not only cowardly but also unjust, given that he should have fought to protect people back home, or to give the other soldiers on his side a better chance of winning. The same applies to virtues other than bravery, such as generosity and moderation, and so Aristotle says that justice in the broad sense is 'in accordance with virtue as a whole' (1130b18–19, 1138a5–6;

³⁶ See, e.g., Williams 1980; Pearson 2006.

compare 1129b25-33, 1130a8-10). Any virtuous action that recognizes obligations to other people is, in this sense, just.

Aristotle has two ways of describing justice and injustice in the broad sense. One is in terms of lawfulness (1129a32-1129b1, 1129b11-25, 1130b8-9, 1138a5-6), the other in terms of dealings with other people (1129b25-33, 1130a10-13, 1130b1-2, 1130b20). These might seem to sit together comfortably: the objective of laws is, according to Aristotle, to secure the common good of the community, or some special group within it (1129b14-17), and laws do so, we might think, by putting constraints around people's treatment of one another. So anything lawful will be interpersonal, and vice versa. But in fact the two descriptors might pull in different directions. What if laws prohibit an action that is not interpersonal? When deciding whether or not this is an unjust action we would have to choose between lawfulness (it is unlawful, and so unjust) and interpersonality (not unjust, by this criterion), whereas Aristotle wants lawfulness and interpersonality to be complementary considerations. This shows the wider importance of suicide – an unlawful action against oneself – for Aristotle. He does not present the discussion of suicide as the response to a problem; on the face of it, he is considering, in a detached spirit, whether it is possible to commit injustice against oneself. But suicide poses a problem for the coherence of his account of justice and injustice in the broad sense, and his discussion of suicide has to confront it. By contrast, there are other questions about suicide that Aristotle does not need to consider. For example, he does not need to say whether there are circumstances that make suicide the appropriate, moral or rational choice. The only suicides that raise a difficulty for him are those that, judged by the standard of lawfulness, are plainly *unjust*. This suggests that we should not come to the passage expecting it to address all the moral questions about suicide that occur to us.

Aristotle considers only a certain kind of suicide, suicide 'out of anger':

Whenever someone voluntarily inflicts harm contrary to the law, not in retaliation, he is committing injustice; and someone who acts knowing both whom he is acting upon and the instrument is acting voluntarily. But someone who kills himself out of anger does what the law prohibits, and does so voluntarily and against correct reasoning. So he commits injustice. (1138a7-11)

Suicide 'out of anger' presumably occurs when the person feels remorse or self-disgust so strongly that it is expressed through violence.³⁷ Greek

³⁷ Compare Kraut 2002: 162.

literature provides an example in Sophocles' Haemon, the husband-to-be of Antigone. He attempts unsuccessfully to murder his father, Creon, who has caused his beloved Antigone to hang herself; after coming very close to parricide, he is 'furious at himself' (*Antigone* 1235) and turns his sword against himself.

Why does Aristotle focus on this kind of suicide? The answer has to do with the voluntary character of unjust actions. As we have seen, he is interested in suicide that is, at least by the standard of lawfulness, unjust. He has previously claimed that all genuine acts of injustice are voluntary (1135a15-20); evidently this claim applies to justice and injustice in the broad sense, not only those in the narrow sense, as in the passage quoted above he shows that the suicide is undertaken voluntarily – the suicidal person 'does so voluntarily' – before he concludes that it is unjust, which here means unjust in the broad sense. As involuntary acts cannot be acts of injustice, the only suicides that Aristotle needs to consider are those undertaken voluntarily. Earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he has discussed voluntary and involuntary acts at some length, and he has argued that acts undertaken out of anger are voluntary (1111a24-b3). The same point is implied when he says that an injury committed out of anger is a genuine act of injustice (1135b19-24); here too he must believe that acting out of anger is voluntary. But acting out of, say, fear is more complicated: the pressure exerted by fear makes it at least arguable that the action is involuntary, and Aristotle suggests that such actions should be classed as 'mixed', not purely voluntary (1110a4-19). So it is not certain that someone who commits suicide because he or she fears an appalling prospect – torture, an agonizing illness, or a lingering death – is acting voluntarily in the fullest sense. And so, as all acts of injustice are voluntary, it is comparatively unclear whether this suicide is such an act. But it is precisely *unjust* suicides that are at issue, and so Aristotle sets aside suicide chosen out of fear in favour of a more obviously voluntary action – suicide 'out of anger'. A corollary of this is that Aristotle might have written more sympathetically had he been considering a wider range of suicides, such as those undertaken out of fear or despair; as he himself says, involuntary actions sometimes call for pity (1109b30-5).

Aristotle is in no doubt that suicide out of anger satisfies the criterion of unlawfulness. Unfortunately the text where he discusses the law is disputed, but an elegant solution is to suppose that he originally wrote the following: 'for example, in cases where (οἷον οὗ οὐ) the law does not order the person to kill himself, and it forbids the suicides that it does not

order . . . ' (1138a6-7).³⁸ There are cases where the law requires or authorizes suicide – probably Aristotle is referring to execution by self-poisoning, illustrated by the death of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* – but it forbids suicide in other cases. So somebody who kills himself purely on his own initiative, out of regret or disgust at his previous conduct, is breaking the law. There can be no wriggling out of the unlawfulness of the suicide. And so, by that measure, the suicide must be unjust.

What then of the claim that all unjust acts are interpersonal? Aristotle's solution is to argue that suicide is, as an act of injustice, interpersonal: the city or community is the victim of the injustice, even though the violence is inflicted on the suicidal person's own body. He has already suggested that someone is a victim of injustice only if his or her wishes are overruled by the action (1136b3-5).³⁹ Of course, something unjust can happen to people out of their own choice – for example, a man might ingratiate himself with a group of powerful bullies by letting them appropriate his property unlawfully. But if the man wants that to happen, he is not a *victim* of injustice (1136a27-8). So when, in a case of unjust suicide, we try to identify the victim of the injustice, it cannot be the person who voluntarily killed himself (1138a12), as the act was in accordance with his wishes. Instead the victim must be the city (1138a11-14): the city imposes penalties on the body of the deceased,⁴⁰ and it would not do so if it were not itself wronged by the suicide. Aristotle's text does not specify how exactly the city is affected: one possibility is that suicidal people claim for themselves a prerogative – putting someone to death – that belongs to the city; another is that the city is deprived of the contribution that the dead people would otherwise have made. But Aristotle evidently feels that this is something that he does not need to specify: he needs to show merely that the city's response to a suicide shows it to be the victim of injustice.

³⁸ See Broadie and Rowe 2002: 175. For a more drastic solution, see Joachim 1951: 161. Another solution is to take the Greek verb *κέλεύω* to mean not 'order' but 'permit' or 'authorize'; for a permissive meaning of the Greek verb in legal contexts see Canevaro 2016: 53 and MacDowell 2009: 46–7. Canevaro and MacDowell are discussing Demosthenes 20.99 and 29.29, respectively. I am grateful to Roger Brock for discussion of this point.

³⁹ 'Wish' (*βούλησις*) can be used to mark a specific kind of wish: rational wish for what the agent regards as good (113a15–113b2). But Aristotle takes himself to have shown that nobody is *voluntarily* a victim of injustice, not that *rational wish* specifically is contravened (1138a26–8). When Aristotle discusses injustice contravening the victim's wishes, it is not certain whether he is discussing injustice in the broad or narrow sense (or both), but the reference to this passage in 1138a26–8 shows that its comments apply to the discussion of suicide, and so must apply to injustice in the broad sense.

⁴⁰ See the text to n.29 above.

Usually individual people will also be affected by the suicide: friends and family, such as Creon, the father of the suicide in Sophocles' play. It is compatible with what Aristotle says to view them too as victims of the injustice, provided that, as is very likely to be the case, they are harmed against their wishes. We can compare the cowardly soldier considered above: by abandoning his post he harms both the city as a whole and the soldiers on his side, and so both the city and these particular men are victims of his injustice.⁴¹ The advantage of making the *city* the victim, from Aristotle's perspective, is that the connection with laws is more secure: the city's laws prohibit suicide, and the city dishonours the bodies of those who, despite its orders, kill themselves. And a key objective of the passage, I have argued, is to show that considerations of law and of interpersonal point in the same direction – towards the injustice of the suicide.

To an extent Aristotle's particular approach to injustice has driven him into a corner. But he deploys civic practice effectively to show that his solution – making suicide an injustice against the city – is in keeping with attitudes to suicide in Athenian society.

5 **Cicero and the Stoics on Suicide**

One of the fullest accounts of Stoic ethics to have survived from antiquity is found in the third book of Cicero's dialogue *On Moral Ends*, where Cicero puts into the mouth of the Roman statesman Cato an explanation of the Stoic theory of goodness, evil and value. According to Cato, human nature is such that people choose to have some things, such as bodily health and well-functioning sense organs, and avoid others, such as pain and illness. The former are called 'according to nature', the latter 'contrary to nature'.⁴² This natural preference is shown by the unreflective behaviour of babies and children, but as people mature it develops into a stable and reasoned pattern of choices (3.16, 20). All our ethical choices are bound up with these items, and suicide is no exception: the prospect of things 'contrary to nature' makes suicide appropriate (3.60).

[Cato:] Since all appropriate actions proceed from these things [i.e. the things according to nature or contrary to nature], it is with good reason that all our thoughts are said to refer to them, including both departing from life and remaining in it. If most of what someone has is according to nature, the appropriate action for him is to remain in life; but if someone has, or expects

⁴¹ See Young 2006: 183.

⁴² Compare Plutarch *Stoic self-contradictions* 1042d, *Common Conceptions* 1063d.

to have, a preponderance of the opposite things, the appropriate action for him is to depart from life.

An action is appropriate if it is rational given the prospect of things according to nature, or contrary to nature. If an illness is becoming chronic, and there is no sign of recovery, it is rational to get medical treatment to remove it – and so, first of all, visiting the doctor becomes the appropriate action. Cicero's Cato approaches the question of suicide as if it could be settled simply by these considerations: if someone has, for example, an incurable illness that will cause him pain, and if the illness and the pain are severe enough to outweigh the things 'according to nature' that are still available, it becomes rational for him to end the illness through suicide. Suicide is being integrated into the Stoic account of rational choice and, we might say, normalized: the ethical framework within which suicide is considered is exactly the same as that in which we consider whether to take exercise or a painkiller.

Cato is assuming that duration affects value, positive or negative: chronic illness is worse than a short illness, and being healthy over a long period is better than over a short period. He has stated this explicitly earlier in his account of Stoic ethics (3.47), and there he drew a contrast between health and virtue. Virtue has a different kind of value, which Stoics mark with the term 'goodness', and it does not gain more of this special kind of value by being sustained over time (3.45–6). (Stoics even use special verbs to distinguish between 'pursuing' virtue and 'selecting' morally neutral items, such as health.)⁴³ The measure of goodness is whether we have perfected the rationality with which we choose between items, such that we become utterly reliable and consistent in our choices; this is what it means to be virtuous. If someone has perfected his or her reason, it is not somehow made even more perfect by living longer. By the same principle, if people have failed to perfect their reasoning, and so are unreliable as ethical agents (the Stoic account of moral vice), that is true of them at a moment, or over a short period, no less than over a long period. In Stoicism there are

⁴³ See Cicero *On Moral Ends* 3.20, 21, 4.20, 4.39, 4.62, 4.72; Graver 2016: 130–1, particularly n.31. At one point, Cicero's Cato says that morally neutral items, such as health, should not be 'pursued in themselves' (3.21); his point is to contrast *pursuit* (*expetere*), which is of the good, with *selection* (*sumere*), which is of the morally neutral. In my view this passage has misled some scholars into thinking that the value of health, and so on, is instrumental in Stoicism: 'they are not desirable in their own right and independently of a desire for the good' (Frede 1999: 92). But Cato says that what is according to nature, such as health, 'is to be selected for its own sake' (3.20). For the value of health, wealth and so on in Stoic ethics, see especially Barney 2003. Klein 2015: 242–5 argues, I think conclusively, that promoted indifferents, such as health, do not have instrumental value as means to virtue.

thus two radically different kinds of value, only one of which is affected by duration.⁴⁴ Virtue does not in itself give virtuous people a reason for prolonging their lives, and equally the non-virtuous should not be motivated by their vices to commit suicide (3.61). The only items that provide grounds for or against suicide are those that increase in value, positive or negative, over time, such as bodily health, pain and illness, all of which are in themselves morally neutral.

Here there is an important difference between the Stoic position and that taken by the leading speakers in Plato's dialogues. In Plato it is often suggested that it is worse to have a moral vice, such as folly or injustice, over a long time than over a short time. So if someone is incurably unjust, it is in his interests to die (*Laws* 862e).⁴⁵ This passage does not mention the afterlife, but Plato's writing on that subject too suggests that having a moral vice over a long period increases the harm (*Phaedo* 107c-d; see [chapter 2, section 2](#)). Stoics explicitly distanced themselves from this Platonic view. The Stoic Chrysippus criticized Plato for saying that it is better not to live if one does not know how to live properly: as Chrysippus dryly put it, when exhorting people to undertake philosophy it is counter-productive to encourage them to kill themselves.⁴⁶ The Stoics were, like Plato, admirers of Socrates, and their disagreement reflects different ways of understanding Socrates' call to prioritize the acquisition of virtue and wisdom. The Stoics treat virtue as having a quite different kind of value from other items we tend to choose, which are, strictly speaking, not 'good' at all. In Plato, by contrast, happiness is affected by virtue more than by other goods, such as health, but the kind of value virtue has is at least similar enough to the value of health for duration to make a similar difference: it is better to possess a good for a long time than for a short time, regardless of whether the good is bodily health or a virtue, such as justice.⁴⁷ Another follower of Socrates, Plato's older contemporary Antisthenes, reportedly urged those without intelligence or understanding to hang themselves.⁴⁸ This may have been intended merely as a harshly worded injunction to gain understanding; Chrysippus praised Antisthenes for saying it, and, given the Stoics' own view about suicide, that suggests

⁴⁴ Compare Cooper 1999: 532.

⁴⁵ Compare *Laws* 854c. For this contrast between Plato and the Stoics, see especially Cooper 1999: 524.

⁴⁶ Plutarch *Stoic self-contradictions* 1039d-e. Probably Chrysippus was referring to *Cleitophon* 408a (see *Slings* 1999: 217–9).

⁴⁷ But see the distinction between 'divine goods' (the virtues) and 'human goods', such as health, at *Laws* 631b-d.

⁴⁸ 'Reason or a noose' (Plutarch *Stoic self-contradictions* 1039e-40a). A similar sentiment is attributed to the Cynic Diogenes at Diogenes Laertius 6.24.

that he at least did not interpret Antisthenes as actually recommending suicide to people who lack wisdom.

In Cicero's dialogue, Cato does not mention the social, political or religious considerations for or against suicide that we found in Plato and Greek tragedy. The silence is all the more remarkable for the fact that the historical Cato had committed suicide shortly before Cicero composed *On Moral Ends*, not to avoid illness or pain but as a political act. Defeated in civil war by Julius Caesar, he refused to give Caesar an opportunity to pardon him, his reason being that accepting the pardon would have recognized Caesar's authority as master over him, and so would have made him complicit in the destruction of the Roman Republic.⁴⁹ Cato's suicide was an awkward subject for Cicero. Caesar was still alive during the composition of *On Moral Ends* in 45 BC. Cicero's letters show him agonizing over whether to express admiration in public for the dead Cato; after writing his *Cato*, he brooded over Caesar's response to it (*Letters to Atticus* 12.4, 12.5, 12.40, 13.27, 13.50 = 240, 242, 281, 298, 348 Shackleton Bailey). Even after Caesar had been assassinated, and his enemies could safely be praised, Cato's suicide remained a source of embarrassment to Cicero, for Cicero too had been on the losing side of the civil war, and yet *his* choice was to live under Caesar's rule. In later writing, Cicero takes pains to emphasize that suicide was appropriate for Cato, given his extraordinary steadfastness and seriousness, whereas for others it would have been wrong (*On Duties* 1.112).

It is less surprising, then, that in *On Moral Ends* Cicero's Cato does not so much as hint at political motivations for suicide and focusses narrowly on the relevance of health, virtue and so on for suicide.⁵⁰ Another part of the explanation is that Cicero is explaining the Stoic theory of value, and his critique of Stoic ethics in Book 4 will focus on the relationship between what is good, such as virtue, and what is according to nature, such as health: why, he asks, do Stoics deny that the latter are good, and is their contrast between them a distinctly Stoic view or one shared by other traditions? So throughout Book 3 the main task for Cicero is to explain Stoic evaluation, and his account of suicide shows how that evaluation is applied to reasoning about life and death. The passage on suicide is intended to explain accurately the Stoic theory of value, but it is also

⁴⁹ See Griffin 1986a, 1986b; Edwards 2005; Plutarch *Cato the Younger* 66.

⁵⁰ The explanation cannot be that it would be implausible to make Cato hint at an event that, at the time of the fictional conversation, lay in the future. Elsewhere in the dialogue Cicero is happy to make a prediction that breaks with strict verisimilitude: his friend Pomponius will gain the name 'Atticus' (5.4.)

a Ciceronian product, shaped by Cicero's concerns in this part of the dialogue as well as by his uneasiness with recent political events.

The silence in Cicero about politically motivated suicide is not representative of Stoicism. According to the Platonist commentator Olympiodorus, Stoics set out five reasons for committing suicide. Each of them is compared with a reason for ending a symposium, a drinking party that in the comparisons stands for life.⁵¹ One is an incurable illness that makes the body unable to do what we want of it; it is compared to deteriorating food and drink at the party. This matches Cicero's passage. But another reason is an obligation to other people, and the example given is Menoeceus' decision, in the myth represented in tragedy, to kill himself in order to protect his city (p. 176 above). In the party this would be an obligation to attend to a friend who arrives unexpectedly. A third reason is to avoid saying 'what should not be said' when coerced by a tyrant; the example in Olympiodorus is a Pythagorean woman refusing to reveal the religious secrets of Pythagoreanism, but presumably this stands for refusing to say anything that, for religious or political reasons, should not be uttered. Suicide is the only way to avoid becoming guilty of, or complicit in, a form of betrayal.⁵² If we wish to relate Cato's suicide to Olympiodorus' scheme – not in order to speculate about the historical Cato, but to see how the Stoic scheme applies in practice – his refusal to accept Caesar's pardon probably falls under this heading. Evidently there can be moral and political reasons, related to obligations to other people, the state and the gods, to commit suicide. This is not incompatible with Cicero's comments on virtue and vice, for these had to do with the *duration* of the virtue or vice: people should not stay alive in order to prolong virtue, or commit suicide in order to cut short vice. But Cicero's passage gave no indication that obligations to other people can have a bearing on suicide.

The survey of Stoic ethics in Diogenes Laertius (7.130) confirms that Cicero's account of Stoic suicide does not give the whole picture:

⁵¹ *Commentary on the Phaedo*, ed. Westerink, 1.8. Compare SVF 3.768.

⁵² In the party this is represented by the arrival of foul-mouthed revellers: better to end the party than to get caught up in their behaviour. The other two reasons are a poverty where one becomes reliant on wicked people (represented in the party by a lack of provisions) and madness (represented by drunkenness). Stoics make it clear that by madness they mean not a moral deficiency (in some other contexts they describe foolish or wicked people as 'mad'), but a psychological condition deriving from the body: it is compared to a drunkenness that 'takes hold' of us, and for which we cannot be held responsible. They thus avoid suggesting that moral vice is in itself a reason for suicide. (Westerink translates 'senility', not 'madness', but then there would be no reason to specify that the condition derives from the body.) For Plotinus' discussion of suicide and madness, see *Ennead* 1.9; Gertz 2011: 31–2.

They say that the wise man departs from life when he has good reason to do so: for his homeland, for his friends, and in pain that is too severe, or if his body is permanently impaired, or in incurable illness.

The accounts in Olympiodorus and Diogenes Laertius have their own limitations: both authors are listing ways in which suicide becomes appropriate, and so neither has reason to explain ways in which obligations to other people might *deter* the Stoic agent from suicide. But Seneca is eloquent where they are silent (*Letter* 104.3–4):

Sometimes, even if pressed by good reasons, for the sake of those dear to us breath should be called back, even if it involves great pain, and held back in our very mouth. For the good man should live not for as long as it pleases him but for as long as he should. If someone does not value his wife or friend enough to linger longer in life, but insists on dying, he is self-indulgent. The mind should give itself this command when the interests of loved ones require it, not only if it wants to die, but if it has started to die. It is a mark of a mighty mind to turn back to life for someone else's sake, and great men have often done so.

Seneca draws his example not from history or mythology but from his own life: in old age he is taking care of his own health for his wife's sake.⁵³ But there is a clear contrast with Ajax's suicide (see p. 175 above): greatness is shown, in some cases, by prioritizing loved ones and their vulnerability. Elsewhere Seneca takes up the social dimension of Socrates' death, again to show the claims of loved ones, and now the city as well, on the person contemplating death (70.9):

Socrates could have ended his life by fasting and died by starvation rather than poison. All the same, he spent thirty days in prison waiting for death, not thinking 'anything could happen', or 'such a long delay gives me many reasons to hope', but in order that he might surrender himself to the laws and give his friends the benefit of Socrates at his end.⁵⁴

As we have seen, this is compatible with Socrates' motivation in the *Phaedo*, despite the emphasis on religion, rather than law or friendship, in his discussion of suicide there.

⁵³ Edwards 1997 argues well against connecting the historical Seneca with his apparent self-revelation in the correspondence. For an ancient account of Seneca's suicide as an unsuccessful attempt to imitate Socrates, see Tacitus *Annals* 15.60–64.

⁵⁴ Compare the following general remark on suicide: "Will he not take his departure if circumstances suggest it?" "Of course, as long as he can no longer be of use to anyone; if he will be concerned with nothing except pain" (98.16).

At the start of the chapter we saw that a crisis in interpersonal relationships can cause people to commit suicide, as in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Does anything like this play a part in Stoic accounts of suicide? There is no sign of it in Cicero's *On Moral Ends*, and typically Stoic authors emphasize the independence or self-sufficiency of the virtuous person.⁵⁵ But in fact the Stoic framework can accommodate that kind of consideration without any difficulty. In Stoicism suicide should be motivated by the prospect of what is according to nature, or contrary to nature. In Cicero it looked as if these items all have to do with the condition and functioning of the body, but this narrow view of them suits his purposes: in his critique of Stoicism, he will press Cato on the question of the body and its well-being (4.26) and suggest that Stoics do not attach sufficient importance to the body. So it helps to present the two kinds of value, goodness and what is according to nature, as concerning the mind and the body, respectively. In another account of Stoic ethics, there is a much wider range of items according to nature and their contraries, not all of which are concerned with the human body: among other things, wealth and good reputation are according to nature, and poverty and disgrace are contrary to it.⁵⁶ On this view, social disgrace could be a respectable consideration in favour of suicide, although the Stoic agent would have to consider whether it is sufficiently severe to outweigh every available, or expected, item that is according to nature. It is worth remembering that our sources are not always consistent about the range of items contrary to, or according to, nature, and this seems to reflect not just confusion or partiality on the authors' part but disagreement between Stoics themselves. For example, according to Cicero's Cato 'most Stoics' deny that pleasure is according to nature (3.17), from which it sounds as if at least one Stoic disagrees, and that is confirmed by the inclusion of pleasure in Diogenes Laertius' list (7.102). So there is little reason to expect every Stoic to have taken the same view of Ajax's motivation.

Stoics have more to say about whether someone should defer to god when considering suicide. There is, at first sight, a tension deriving from their emphasis on the virtuous agent's autonomy and their admiration for

⁵⁵ This is sometimes in the face of tyrants and other political authorities (Seneca 104.32, Epictetus 1.9.17).

⁵⁶ Diogenes Laertius 7.102–3. Compare the inclusion of poverty, or at least a form of poverty where one becomes reliant on wicked people, as a proper reason for suicide in Olympiodorus' account above. In Diogenes Laertius the items with positive value are called not 'according to nature' but 'promoted indifferents', which means that they make no difference to happiness, but have a secondary kind of value, like an official at court who is promoted to a certain rank or function but will never be king (see *On Moral Ends* 3.52).

Socrates. On the one hand, according to Stoicism human beings have been put in the world to make rational choices: reason is the ‘gift’ that distinguishes us from other animals, and we fulfil our nature by exercising reason correctly.⁵⁷ People deciding to commit suicide in order to end an incurable and extremely painful illness, if they have correctly weighed the negative value of the illness against the available items of positive value, are doing precisely what they ought to do. Human reasoning, at least when perfected in the virtuous agent, is given the authority of law: true law is laid down by each virtuous person whenever she or he makes a rational choice.⁵⁸ ‘In following this self-imposed law, we become autonomous agents – and the only way to live autonomously is to live that way.’⁵⁹

On the other hand, Socrates deferred to divine oracles and communications, such as his spiritual voice, and his account of suicide in the *Phaedo* permits it only when the gods have delivered a sign. The Stoic Epictetus echoes this with approval. He wishes for pupils who feel their affinity with god so strongly as to desire death, but then notes that he would restrain them (1.9.16):

You are human beings – wait for god. When he gives a signal and releases you from this service, then release yourselves and go to him. But for now be content to inhabit the region where he has stationed you.

Epictetus is not prohibiting suicide or arguing that people should wait until they die of natural causes. On receiving a signal, his pupils should release themselves. And in practice the requirement to have a signal is not as restrictive as we might think (3.26.29):

‘What if god does not provide food?’ ‘Well, in that case god has, like a good general, given a signal: the retreat.’

Poverty extreme enough to deny someone food could itself be the required signal.⁶⁰ The point can then be extended to other occasions where the future contains a preponderance of things contrary to nature: the signal has been given, and so there is no impiety in committing suicide. Epictetus can thus both insist on the need to wait for a divine sign and say, in the very same discourse (1.9.20), that the ‘door is open’ for us to depart from life.⁶¹ The circumstances that make it rational to commit suicide constitute the

⁵⁷ Diogenes Laertius 7.86. ⁵⁸ Dio Chrysostom 80.3, Cicero *On the Laws* 1.18.

⁵⁹ Cooper 2004: 213.

⁶⁰ Compare the biographical account of Zeno’s suicide, which, regardless of its historical accuracy, makes this point about divine signs and what is contrary to nature (Diogenes Laertius 7.28).

⁶¹ Compare 1.24.19–20.

signal. In a later discourse we find a similar combination. First Epictetus suggests living for as long as ‘reason chooses me to remain with my little body’ and dying ‘when reason chooses against this’, but soon afterwards he advises imitation of Socrates: retreat when given a ‘signal’ from god (1.29.28–9). The tension is removed by an unfettered re-interpretation of divine signals that is itself highly Socratic: the circumstances under which we are living are taken as imperatives from god. There is therefore no inconsistency between Epictetus’ comments on a divine signal and the suggestions in Seneca, and in Epictetus himself, that it is for each of us to reason whether or not to commit suicide.⁶² This might give the impression that Epictetus is not expressing a genuinely religious or theological view at all. But that would be to miss his point. It is not only irrational but impious to misuse the reason each of us has, and to decide upon an action such as suicide after a superficial, or partial, look at our circumstances.

6 Summary

In Plato’s *Phaedo* Socrates discusses whether suicide contravenes religious obligations. He takes a ban on suicide and, in providing a theological argument for the ban, qualifies it: suicide is permissible in the event of a divine sign. The theological character of his argument does not completely exclude concern for other human beings: the description of human beings as the gods’ property or slaves implies that they have tasks or functions, which, according to other passages of Plato, benefit other people, not the gods themselves. And the ‘necessity’ facing Socrates depends on his own sense of political obligation, summarized in the *Phaedo* and explored in more depth in the *Crito*.

The discussion of suicide in the *Laws* is about its punishment, and the visitor is suitably vague about the circumstances where there should be no punishment. Unlike some Stoic passages, he is not trying to determine what makes suicide the appropriate or correct action, even though the brief comments on purification (and his silence about the need for purification in some cases) might seem to suggest otherwise. The penal principles of the *Laws* suggest that the punishment of certain suicides should have beneficial effects, one of which may be to prevent the family presenting the suicide as a correct or admirable action.

When Aristotle discusses suicide, he faces a problem of his own making: how to combine lawfulness and interpersonal, as criteria of justice and

⁶² See, for example, *Letters* 70.5 and 117.22–23.

injustice, when dealing with an unlawful act against oneself. His solution is to argue that in suicide the city is the victim of the injustice, although he does not specify precisely how the city is wronged. Aristotle too does not need to consider whether some suicides are appropriate; rather, the suicides most relevant to his discussion are those that are most clearly unjust.

Cicero's outline of Stoic ethics provides one of the most familiar Stoic discussions of suicide, but it is unrepresentative in its silence about other people, politics and religion. Cicero focusses narrowly on the aspects of Stoic evaluation that he will argue against in the following book. Other passages show that in Stoic ethics social, political and religious circumstances can provide reasons for or against suicide.

Conclusion

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of death is about what to do as well as the removal of fear. Epicureanism is known above all for its arguments against fearing death, but they should not be treated in isolation from Epicurean reflections on how to act. On the contrary, Philodemus' discussion of concern for the people we love and leave behind seems to be informed by Epicurus' personal example of making arrangements for others in his will. All the same, when Greek and Roman philosophers discuss appropriate action, such as in their writing on suicide, their priorities may be different from those of contemporary ethics.

Concerning the fate of the soul at death, ancient discussions do not simply choose between Epicurus (annihilation) and Plato (immortality). Cicero's sceptical consolation echoes and vindicates Socrates' recognition of two options at the end of Plato's *Apology*. Seneca's writing about death moves between views of its outcome without ever deciding firmly in favour of one of them. Even if the soul survives death, it is not agreed that its survival provides *us* with further existence. Marcus Aurelius calls into question the assumption that his separated soul will still carry his identity, and suggests that after death the soul should be regarded as a world-part, not as a part of him or identical to him. Already in Plato's *Phaedo* it looks as if less of us will survive death, through the continued existence of the soul, than most people would want.

I have also tried to give space to other areas of disagreement between philosophers that the question of the soul's survival can obscure. One concerns the importance of the philosophy of death (rather than philosophy more generally) when preparing for death. Plato makes Socrates' last conversation a debate largely about the immortality of the soul, but both Plato and Seneca explore ways in which other kinds of philosophy, about metaphysics, value and god, make people ready to die. By contrast, Epicurus isolates death as the topic that needs our attention if we are to face our own deaths without fear. This goes some way to explaining why

Epicurus and his followers seem more (or, some would say, even more) preoccupied with death in their ethical writing than other Greek and Roman philosophers. Another part of the explanation for the prominence of death in Epicureanism is Epicurus' theory of value, especially his view of the easiness of attaining goodness and the importance, and possibility, of completely avoiding some kinds of harm.

Another disagreement is about the relationship between time and value. Plato's Socrates agrees with other philosophers that unending existence is not, in itself, good. We would not think this of Plato if we relied on Epicurus and his criticism of the desire for 'immortality' (*Letter to Menoeceus* 124), which I interpreted as a polemical reference to Plato. Plato's consistent habit of supplementing arguments for immortality with myths, or other speculation, about the destiny of a separated soul suggests that he is trying to avoid presenting the prospect of unending existence as a self-standing source of comfort; and there is explicit evidence in the dialogues, such as the *Symposium*, that we should desire not simply everlasting existence but the everlasting possession of something good, such as virtue. But Plato's dialogues take a distinctive view of the relationship between time and value: in Plato, it is suggested that the positive value of possessing *any* good, moral or otherwise, increases over time, and reaches its fullest possible extent only if it is possessed everlastingly. The corresponding point holds concerning evil, moral or non-moral, and everlasting possession. Epicureans and Stoics both argue that an infinitely long period is not needed to derive maximal benefit from the possession of goodness, and Stoics argue, in their discussion of suicide, that vice does not increase in disvalue, or virtue in positive value, by being prolonged over time. This contradicts the connection that Plato's *Symposium* draws between desiring goodness and desiring immortality. Diotima tries to expand the simple statement that people love the good (206a) and she makes what Plato apparently regards as uncontroversial expansions: people want the good to belong to *them*, and to belong to them *forever*. From this it sounds as if it is just obvious that in wanting something as a good, people want there to be no future time at which they do not possess it, and so no future time at which they do not exist as possessors of goodness – in Diotima's account, the desire to possess the good is utterly unconditional, and does not even have as a precondition the person's own continued existence. Against this Platonic passage, the Stoics and Epicureans seek to separate desire for goodness from desiring to possess goodness forever. Desiring goodness is an entirely laudable desire, whereas desiring endless possession of goodness betrays ignorance about its real nature and completion.

Finally, I have explored contrasting accounts of what it means to be or become immortal. Within Plato's dialogues we find competing views of immortality: everlastingness; divinity and godlikeness; and (in the *Phaedrus*) everlastingness and constant activity. By the last pair of criteria, an everlasting, frozen body and even an everlasting, changeless soul, such as the *Phaedo* describes, are not immortal. Within one and the same dialogue, the *Timaeus*, Plato explores immortality both as a quality guaranteed of rational souls by their creator, no matter how we behave or reason, and later as an achievement of the most successful mortal-immortal composites. In the second passage, immortality has nothing to do with duration, let alone everlastingness. Similarly in Aristotle's exhortation to immortalize oneself, or (in the translation I suggested) act as an immortal, he is not encouraging people to prolong their lives, or to leave behind them writing or some other legacy that will preserve memory of them. He means that people should not let the limitations associated with mortality, or (as he usually prefers to say) humanity, diminish their ambitions in philosophy and science. The gods' immortality can sometimes control or guide re-interpretations of human immortality, such as in Empedocles and early Stoicism: once a philosopher has found a way to preserve the gods' immortality in a finitely durable world-system, he can apply this new view of immortality to human beings as well, including, in Empedocles' poetry, himself. Calling the gods 'immortal' is to mark the fact that they are not subject to the process of death, not to claim that they could outlast the end of the world as it is currently configured – just as if a woman were not subject to aging, illness or the other causes of human mortality, we would call her 'immortal', without meaning to imply that she will survive the end of all life on our planet and live on when the sun swells and engulfs the earth. So perhaps the strange story of Elina Makropulos is not such a bad introduction to Greek views of immortality, at least in Stoicism and Empedocles.

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